

Luke 1:39-55

Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Why Has This Happened to Me? - December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-55

After the baby Jesus, the character we think about most during the Christmas season must be Mary. After all, without Mary, Christmas couldn't happen, could it? Jesus, as we tend to forget, came into the world the way all of us do. Jesus entered the world as a helpless baby, just like all of us do. In other words, Jesus, Son of God, Savior of the World, is just like us — and that is a key point of the Christian message. Jesus was and is a human being, a human being who experienced everything we all experience as human beings. Jesus was born of a woman. It means, of course, Jesus did the same things all babies do. He cried when he was hungry. He cried when he wanted to be held. He cried, yes, when he needed his diaper changed, just like all of us did. It may seem strange to talk about the savior of the world soiling his diaper, but if we believe him to be fully human, that is part of our shared human experience.

Yes, Mary is the key character in the story of the birth of Jesus. Consider the circumstances of her pregnancy: Mary was engaged to her future husband Joseph, but they had not slept together. Imagine her surprise, imagine the surprise of any woman to discover she was pregnant without having relations with anyone. All Mary knew was that she experienced the visitation of an angel who told her she was going to have a baby. Amazing! How would you, how would any of us relate to such an event? When we hear the story of Mary's encounter with the angel, what is equally amazing is that she agrees. She accepts what is going to happen to her — even though she realizes that the news of her pregnancy could indeed cost her her future with Joseph. I mean, really, what man, back then or even now, would accept and understand that his fiancé was pregnant?

Yes, Joseph, too, has a quiet but equally important role in the drama of the birth of Jesus. Think of it, how would you feel if you found out that your girlfriend, your fiancé was pregnant and you knew you weren't responsible? How many of you men, seriously, would accept such a situation? Indeed, the scripture reports that Joseph did intend to leave Mary — not making a big fuss — but leaving her nonetheless. It took God sending a dream to Joseph to persuade him to stay on.

Do we appreciate the amazing singularity of the birth of Jesus? How Mary got involved, How Joseph decided to stay. How this couple decided to trust each other and, more importantly, to trust in God. In short, consider all the ways the birth of Jesus could have played out, actually should have played out under human circumstances. Most women in Mary's situation would have a hard time saying yes to a mysterious pregnancy. Most men in Joseph's situation, would simply walk away and say, "good riddance."

We don't dwell on these circumstances, do we? Yet we should not ignore the improbability of Jesus' birth and how much of it was wrapped in love and trust. Clearly Mary and Joseph had to have loved and trusted each other. Neither of them fully understood what was going on, yet each was willing to take a chance on the other. Mary trusted that in spite of the strange circumstances of her pregnancy, Joseph would somehow accept it. Joseph trusted that somehow, he would be able to raise the child of his fiancé, even when he knew it wasn't his.

Both of them trusted in God.

Let's admit it, friends, when we really dig into the circumstances of Jesus' improbable birth, it is so outside human experience that we are tempted to just ignore it. But isn't the word improbable a perfect word to associate with God?

We know perfectly well that the majority of people celebrating Christmas really don't believe the story of Jesus' birth. Even if they do, they don't really accept or understand what it means that Jesus is the Son of God. And even if they do believe that, even fewer are willing to conform their lives to the teachings and example of Jesus. It's just way too hard, isn't it?

But the real point of the birth of Jesus, the real point of our Christian faith is the improbable, impossible idea that there is a God and this God made the universe, and this God made you and me, and this God became a human being like us, and this God loves us so much that God in Jesus Christ died for us, and that God, proving God's love for us, forgave humanity for killing Jesus and instead raised Jesus from the dead proving God's love once and for all.

That, friends, is the sheer improbability of the Christmas story. We are left with only two choices: this story is so ridiculous, so bizarre as to be totally unbelievable, or its sheer improbability makes it true because only the presence of God could make it true.

In short, Christmas should leave us asking the question, "Why has this happened to us?" In other words, if there is a God, why would God go to all the trouble of entering the world as a human being, living a poor life of suffering, experiencing the rejection of authorities, being put on trial for crimes he did not commit, suffering and dying on a cross, and then incredibly being raised to life. Is this just a fairy tale? Is this Jesus just a weird story? Well, if so, it is one of the weirdest stories ever told.

Or, what if it's true? What if this Jesus stuff really happened? What if this birth narrative did happen? What if God really does love the world that God became a human being and entered it in person? If all this is true then the only appropriate question is the same Elizabeth asked Mary 2000 years ago, "Why has this happened to me?"

Elizabeth, a generally forgotten character in the birth narrative of Jesus, is in many ways of equal importance to Mary and Joseph. Sure, Mary and Joseph were the earthly parents of Jesus. They raised him and protected him. We can't forget them and their improbable journeys.

However, Elizabeth is not them. Elizabeth is you and Elizabeth is me. What am I talking about?

Elizabeth is described as a cousin of Mary's to whom she pays a visit. Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptizer, obviously important to the gospel narrative. But really, Elizabeth is pretty much regular folks. She knows that compared with Mary, she is just a bit player in the holy Christmas drama. The scripture quotes her as saying that when she saw Mary, the baby she was carrying, John the Baptizer, leapt for joy in her womb. In other words, the Elizabeth was acknowledging that she and even baby John were among those for whom God sent Jesus into the world.

Elizabeth is one of us. She knows her place. She knows that the baby Mary is carrying, the baby Jesus is coming into the world for her sake. She realizes that Jesus will be someone extremely important and extremely special and all she can do is ask the question as to why someone as plain and unimportant as she should be allowed to be close to Jesus and the mother of Jesus.

"Who am I?" Elizabeth asks, "That this should happen to me?" Elizabeth knew in her heart that God was utterly involved with the pregnancy of Mary. Elizabeth knew that Jesus was going to become someone of extraordinary importance.

And all that left her questioning how she could possibly have anything to do with the incredible story about to unfold. Why me? Why me? Why me?

But friends, at this Christmastime, is that also not our question, too? How, how, how, can this Christmas story be true? How, how, how does it apply to me? How, how, how does God choose to get personally involved with this messed-up world and especially messed-up me?

Yet, friends, this is the good news, the really good news. In fact it is the greatest news ever. God so loves the world that God gave us God's only Son so whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

God loves the world, friends. God loves the world. Not just the rich, not just the famous, not just the powerful. God loves the world. God loves you and God loves me and God loved Elizabeth all those years ago. God loves every single human being ever born and ever to be born equally because God just does! The only, the only, the one and only prerequisite to receiving God's love is to be a human being. That's all.

Do you hear that, friends? Do you believe it, friends? The answer to Elizabeth's 2000 year old question of Why has this happened to Me is simple. Elizabeth encountered Mary not because she was special by the world's standards but because she was just like me and just like you. Mary, mother of Jesus, came to visit ordinary Elizabeth because Jesus came into the world precisely for ordinary Elizabeth and ordinary Bob and ordinary you, and you, and you.

Friends, at this stage of my life I can say with an abundance of confidence that I will never meet anyone super-famous. I will not party at the White House. I will not watch an Eagles game from the classy corporate boxes. I will never ride first class on an airplane or sleep in the executive suite. There has never been and never will be anything special about me.

Except the fact that I share with you the one special thing that really matters, the special thing that is the key to living life. I share with you the special, extraordinary fact that Jesus was born to save you and save me by restoring our relationship with God.

The truth is, the only truth that matters is that the material trappings of the world, the ridiculous ideas people have about status and fashion and money are completely irrelevant. Who cares about power and status and possessions when I know and I pray you know, believe, and rejoice that God entered this world as a poor human being to demonstrate God's endless love for us.

It's sad, it's so sad that most of us regard Jesus as so unlike us that we can't possible relate to him. Yes, the world is saturated with artwork and portrayals of Jesus adorned with halos or dressed in shining robes, or even suffering and bleeding on a cross — none of which average, ordinary us can relate to. We learn about his miracles — things we could never do — and ask what we have in common with him. We certainly can't compete with his insight and his wisdom.

But that's not the point of being a Christian. We can't compete with Jesus on any level, but we're not on this earth to compete with Jesus or even remotely compare ourselves to Jesus. The only thing we need to do is the same thing Elizabeth should have done so long ago: just accept and be glad.

Yes, accept and be glad. Accept and be glad that God made you. Accept and be glad God loves you. Accept and be glad that God chose to identify with us not from a position of power and authority but as a poor, helpless baby. Can we just take off our human filters and human way of seeing the world and believe the best news of all? Jesus loves you, right here, right now. No conditions. Just believe it.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.