

# Fourth Sunday in Advent

**TELL WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU!**

**Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]**

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**Analysis by James Squire**

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

*46 And Mary said,*

*'My soul magnifies the Lord,*

*47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

*48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

*49for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*

*and holy is his name.*

*50His mercy is for those who fear him*

*from generation to generation.*

*51He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

*and lifted up the lowly;*

53he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
54He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

*NOTES: One single leap for joy signifies a world of hurt—now erased. This was not the sadistic leap for joy by sports fans after seeing their team absolutely destroy the competition. This was the humble leap for joy that immediately begs the question: Why am I worthy of this unbelievable favor (v. 43)?*

*Looking for diagnosis points in a joyous announcement of new birth in the family is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Yet, the hyperbole is so “over the top” that you can’t help but wonder what depths of sorrow and woe preceded it. Mary, with her Magnificat, fills in the blanks for us.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Unsettled by Unexpected Favor**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Status Quo Disturbed**

Elizabeth is embarrassed by the gift of this news, or so we imagine. She certainly does not take it for granted as if it were deserved (i.e., “It’s about time something good happened!”). She is exceedingly humble. Perhaps she is also numbered among the lowly (v. 52) and hungry (v. 53) that Mary sings about. Her question in verse 43 indicates that she has gotten used to these conditions as if they were normal. She is taken aback when something so breathtakingly marvelous happens that the new life in her womb leaps for joy. Apparently, this new life inside her is not under her control. It might even be

said that the child's reaction to the news, along with the news itself, disturbs the status quo—the familiar—for her.

Such is the nature of good news for us: The loftier it is, the more disturbing it is. It's not that we're not interested in good news—as good as it can possibly be, in fact. But undeserved good news doesn't fit the schematic in our mind and we don't know how to integrate it. We blush. We protest, "Oh, you shouldn't have!" We even (gulp) feel guilty, "But I didn't do anything for you!" We are "in the dark"—as Elizabeth seems to be—about God's intentions toward us this Advent season. A new life has taken up residence inside us that leaps for joy at the startlingly good news proclaimed in the text. And somewhere beneath all the layers of training, etiquette, and ritual, we ask the Elizabeth question: "Why has this happened to me?"

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Faithless Heart Shaken***

The deeper diagnosis is almost transparent at this point. What else could explain such a question but fear? This is more than a change in routine; this is an historical event. Of course, today we have commercialized it both inside and outside the church to the point of familiarity and predictable patterns. But we still (at least every third year) face the music of the text and Elizabeth's interesting question. We may rationalize her surprise as the pleasant kind, but if the surprise is all pleasure, there'd be no reason for her to ask the question. If it touches something inside us, it touches the faithless heart in us. This is even harder for us to see because questioning the unknown is standard procedure for our world. Yet what does it say about us that we not only question but fear such undeserved favor? "Why has this happened to me?" is not the question of a friend, but a wary observer, and a potential opponent. It reveals our lack of faith.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Lost by God***

We are lost. This is actually a very common diagnosis these days. You don't have to go far to find it. Two seconds of channel surfing, every other talk radio station in the heartland, and plenty of churches on a Sunday morning—all of these avenues overflow with that simple message these days. What antidote is usually given? We need to get prayer back in the school, the Ten Commandments in the court room, the manger scene at City Hall—these and other “we need to” solutions are offered. Aside from the questionable content of many of these proposals, all of these “solutions” miss the mark: we are not simply lost, but in Luke's paradigm, God has lost us (see Bob Bertram's “A Christmas Crossing, <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/ChristmasCrossing.pdf> ) and there is nothing we can do on our own to find him again. We are lowly people who need to be lifted up (v. 52). We are hungry people who need to be filled (v. 53). But the One to whom we should belong does not have us, as will be evidenced by the great fear and terror exhibited by the shepherds in Luke's Christmas story. We are not only lost, as in “lost our way,” but we are lost, as in “lost by God.” Whether that resulted from our “kicking God out of our schools” or for some other reason is immaterial. If God has lost us, there is no hope in us trying to find him.

## **PROGNOSIS: Leaping for Joy**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Saved by God's Blessed Child***

The only hope for us is if God can somehow find us. Like the shepherd seeking out his lost sheep, like the woman searching for her lost coin (Luke 15), God goes to hell and back to find us, thereby saving us, reclaiming us, as his—as if that is the way it ought to be. He may have let us go momentarily, but only for a moment, to get a more lasting grip on us. And through it

all we never stopped being his. We may have gotten stranded, or been stolen from him, but now he is taking us back again. He remains our rightful Lord, but the way he exercises his lordship is by becoming our Savior. His reclaiming work begins as John leaps in Elizabeth's womb; even before he is borne from Mary's womb he is Savior. For the time being, it is only promise and a prenatal excitement. But his presence changes Mary and Elizabeth from lowly and lost, to high spirited and faith-filled. They are saved from their despair. Like the woman and the shepherd in Luke 15, God has left heaven (his safe haven of righteousness) and wandered into our wilderness to find us. Those ninety-nine righteous ones in heaven can just fend for themselves for awhile. Lost sheep consume this Savior's entire focus, and he will not stop until he has not only reclaimed us but restored us to health in his kingdom.

Mary's song lives on today in our liturgies and so does the Lucan Christmas story. It is there for us to be saved by all over again, ready to lift us up from our misery and fill us with good things. We don't have to be proud or powerful or rich to receive God's generous favor. In fact, the more downtrodden we feel, the more he reaches out to us. Most of all, as we are renewed by Luke's story, we can't help but recall this same child's ministry here on earth. And, if we are truthful, we will remember how he was lost from God on the Cross. That's how obsessed this Savior is with finding us. And he did find us—among the dead, and resurrected us in victory over death. A Savior who goes that far, and actually comes out on the other side of death, is truly worthy of our fear, love, and trust.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Unfaith Transformed into Faith***

Bob Bertram (see link above) says of the shepherds, "who have to be rescued by a savior quite other than themselves, are nevertheless drawn in to his salvational action as responsible

firsthand participants, as themselves self-losers and regainers who thus 'follow' their Lord's own cruciform lead. They begin to experience a mortifying loss of self (psyche) in the face of the dreadful apocalyptic glory—it blows the cover of their night." The same is true for Mary and Elizabeth: Elizabeth's question has already been entertained by Mary in the previous story. They both have experienced at least a moment of dread. The unknown has crashed into their lives and revealed their lack of faith. But in that very instant they are also saved. This apocalypse they experience is not the final one, which permanently vanquishes the unrighteous, but rather a pre-apocalypse full of revelation but emptied of death. This apocalypse does not come too late for reversal of fortunes. In fact, this one comes so early that it accomplishes a complete reversal of fortunes. Mary, in response to her question, was told, "Be not afraid." Elizabeth's fear was both revealed and melted away in the same instant as the unborn child leaped for joy in her womb. By the time she spoke her question out loud, it had been transformed from doubt to wonder and amazement. Faith had been born in her, just as it had been born in Mary.

As this good news is heard by us this Advent season, it both reveals our unfaith and transforms it into faith. A presence is reborn in us that leaps for joy at the story and promise this blessed Child brings into our lives. It is the Spirit of that Child who infiltrates our hearts and brings peace and joy to our souls.

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Proclaiming Good News***

Even more than that is packed into this blessed moment. Not only has their unfaith been revealed and healed, but also they find themselves prophesying about the news that has just been given to them. And while the shepherds in Luke 2 prophesy to the holy family, Mary and Elizabeth at least prophesy to each other:

“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord,” says Elizabeth to Mary, already beginning to build up Mary’s faith. Elizabeth sets an example for all of us about how vitally important it is for us to speak the Good News again, rather than assume we know it already. We need to hear a voice—outside ourselves, to affirm that this news is for us. Elizabeth probably didn’t even know that’s that she was doing, but that’s the genius of it. Because it’s not about Elizabeth’s own faith, it is about the Good News she received. Mary takes her own turn, glorifying and praising God before Elizabeth (much as the shepherds later will do when they hear and experience this Good News for themselves). Bob Bertram points out that these newly rejuvenated witnesses aren’t called upon to impress others with their own new-found faith. They are simply called upon to tell “all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them” (2:20). So it is that Mary expounds the virtues of this one who has come as Lord and Savior, talking about all that he has done and will do.

And so it is with us today. We aren’t called to talk about our own rejuvenated faith—as if having the world test our faith will prove how complete our transformation is. Instead, we are simply called to tell the Good News that has graced our lives. We may need to bring ourselves into the telling a bit, but the main task at hand is to proclaim all the wonderful works of our Lord and Savior and invite others to partake of that same wonderful gift.