

# Fourth Sunday in Advent

**HIS MERCY IS FOR THOSE WHO FEAR HIM**

**Luke 1:39-45**

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**Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer**

39In 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 leaped 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 leaped for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and 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."

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## DIAGNOSIS: He Has Scattered the Proud

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Why Has This Happened To Me?*

We do not trust gifts. A gift at Christmas from someone we did not get a gift for only makes us think, "I didn't get them a present!" And because we feel bad, we quickly get them a present in return. Some people, out of pride, refuse charity (gifts). People check their Christmas card lists and if they did not receive a card from someone last year, then they don't send them one this year. This is existence under the law of restitution: this for that, reward or punishment, earn your keep, present for present. That is why, when something unexpected happens to us, we say, "Why me? ; What did I do to deserve this?" We think either that our punishment is not deserved (we don't trust the judgment), or that the gift is not deserved (we don't trust that the gift comes with no strings attached).

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** : *The Thoughts of Their Hearts*

We don't trust that the gift is unfettered. Such distrust belongs to the "imagination of our hearts" (RSV), "the thoughts of our hearts" (v. 51, NRSV), "the proud of heart" (Jerusalem Bible), "the proud with all their plans" (Good News Bible). The problem we have with gifts, even with the things that happen to us, has more to do with our hearts than the gift itself. The heart mistrusts gifts. The heart is proud, wants to accomplish things on its own, wants to work for its wages. The heart wants to make a difference, make something of life, and when a gift is given the heart can't declare that it has earned its keep apart from the influence of the gift. The heart trusts the law of restitution and wants to use it to its own advantage. The heart cannot trust in grace, in mercy, in forgiveness, in God, or

Christ.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *God Has Shown Strength and Scattered Us*

Since our hearts trust the law of restitution, they are given over to that law. The proud may like the sound of such a law, thinking in their pride that they deserve a reward. But it is the proud, in fact all people, who are given what they have earned—God’s strength of arm that scatters people away from life into death. The cost for not trusting God, one’s Creator, is death. That is just, right, holy, and fair. The cry of, “What did I do to deserve this?” is the cry of the disbelieving proud, who are blind to their own disregard for God, proven in their mistreatment of others.

**PROGNOSIS: His Mercy Is for Those Who Fear Him**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *He Has Looked with Favor on Our Lowliness*

When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, her visit was a gift. Elizabeth asked why the mother of her Lord had come to her. Elizabeth asked out of her lowliness, living as she did in the “hill country.” Elizabeth felt unworthy to be in the company of her Lord’s mother—let alone Mary’s son, who would in fact be Elizabeth’s Lord. Her Lord was the One who was coming to look with favor (mercy) on her and all people. This Lord, came to Elizabeth wrapped up as a gift in Mary; but for us, Jesus comes wrapped up in the cross. This does not make a nicely wrapped present. Such a gift is not contained in shiny paper and a bow. This is suffering given to us; this is our Lord dying for us. But it is our Lord who suffers the law of restitution, who gets what we deserve. Now the strength of God’s arm is used not to scatter us into the hands of death, but to raise Jesus our Lord from the dead. The great thing the Almighty has done for us is to forgive us for the sake of Jesus.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) :** *His Mercy Is on Those Who Fear Him*

Elizabeth fears her Lord. And mercy is given to her. Elizabeth trusts that Mary's visit to her is a gift of grace. When she asks why Mary has come to her, it is not a question of doubt, but a confession. Like the centurion in Luke who tells Jesus that he (the centurion) is not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof, so Elizabeth says she is not worthy for Mary, the mother of her Lord, to come to her. But it is because Elizabeth is not worthy that Mary has come, and come to give mercy. Elizabeth rejoices in receiving mercy. Even the child in her womb leaps for joy. So, our fear of God's strength, turns into joy at God's mercy through the gift of Jesus.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *He Has Lifted Up the Lowly*

Mercy overcomes the law of restitution. Since we have received this Gift, no longer are we motivated to see the mighty fall, the rich go away empty, and the proud scattered. To think that way is to live by the law of restitution-which shows no mercy. Trusting our Lord's gracious way, our hearts are made into new hearts that beat with forgiveness and love. That forgiveness and love turns our eyes away from our selfish desires and to see our neighbors and their needs. The hungry need mercy. The lowly need mercy. The lowly are all around us, in children regarded as trouble, service workers ignored, people in group homes who are never visited by their neighbors, and the old who do not move as fast as the young who race from one activity to the next. We have been given mercy. So we can give gifts of mercy—food to the hungry, honor to the lowly, our time and our presence as a gift. So that they ask, "Why have you come to me?" And we get to tell them why. Because our Lord has come to us with mercy.