

God Lifts Up the Lowly!

(Luke 1:39–55)³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”⁴⁶ And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

In Christ Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient to death that we may live forever, dear fellow redeemed,

For a number of years now, one of our nation’s airlines has run a series of commercials featuring the company tagline: “Wanna get away?” The commercials set a humorous scene in which someone does something extremely embarrassing. The camera zooms in on the individual’s face, and the look says it all. Wanna get away?

Do you ever feel that way – so embarrassed, so humiliated by something you’ve done or by something that’s happened to you, that you just want to get away? We like it when people think highly of us, and we like to think highly of ourselves. The last thing we want is to be humbled, to be brought down low. But today, as he often does, our God turns everything upside down, reminding us that preparing for a real Christmas requires a humble spirit. Only those who are humbled by God himself can truly treasure his gift of the Christ-child. The Scripture before us today gives us the opportunity to celebrate the way God works in our lives and to take great encouragement from his own life-giving truth: God Lifts Up the Lowly! 1) with his mighty arm; and 2) in his merciful love.

As our text begins, we find Mary hurrying off to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. She has just learned that she is going to give birth to God’s own Son. She wants to get away, not out of embarrassment. Oh, of course there was going to be talk. At first even Joseph, to whom she was pledged to be married, thought the worst of Mary, until the angel assured him that the virgin had been completely faithful to him and that what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. No, we have to imagine that Mary’s desire to get away wasn’t driven by humiliation, but instead had everything to do with the fact that she had just learned from the angel, Gabriel, that Elizabeth, her elderly relative, was also going to have a child. Who better to talk to? Who better to understand the miraculous power of God’s love at work than Elizabeth? You get the sense that Mary couldn’t wait to share her news.

But as it turned out, she never really got the chance. As soon as Mary said, “Hello,” Elizabeth knew the whole story. How? She and her unborn son, John the Baptizer, were filled with the Holy

Spirit. As the baby leaped in her womb, Elizabeth exclaimed of Mary, **“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” (Luke 1:42)**. What wonderful reassurance God offers Mary through her relative. Yes, the days ahead would be challenging, but that wouldn’t change the fact that Mary was indeed blessed. Of all the women in the world, she would be known as the one who gave birth to the long-awaited Messiah. Elizabeth doesn’t stop there. She goes on to demonstrate for Mary and for us, what true humility looks like. Although she was old enough to be a grandma, maybe even a great grandma, she was finally going to have the child she had longed for her entire life. And yet, instead of making it all about her and the fact that she’s six months pregnant, she celebrates, without a hint of envy, the fact that even greater news than hers, has just arrived at her doorstep – the long-desired Savior from sin will soon be born of Mary. She is so honored by Mary’s visit.

Why? Because having an important visitor makes her feel important? Because now she has bragging rights as one who is related to the Messiah? No. That has nothing to do with it. She is so blessed because God has kept his promise to send this sin-ruined world a Savior. God’s people have been waiting for this moment since he first spoke the gospel promise in Eden thousands of years earlier. Now, the time has come! God has kept his Word! His people have not believed in vain! Elizabeth gives all the credit to God for the gracious promises he makes and for the faith he works in us sinners, faith that clings to his promises. In fact, she says of Mary: **“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (Luke 1:45)**. She’s talking about Mary, but she could just as well say this of all believers. She knows what she’s talking about. Her dear husband, Zechariah, who may be standing right next to her at this very moment, had doubted God’s promise to give him and his wife a baby boy. He thought he knew better than God. He thought he and Elizabeth were too old. He wanted some sign that God would do for him that which he had promised. He got his sign. He wouldn’t be able to speak a word until the day of John’s birth. Yes, blessed are those humble souls who take God at his Word!

Why do I say “humble” souls? Mary explains everything to us in words that the church has made into a song and calls by its Latin name, “The Magnificat” which means to “magnify,” or to “glorify.” Mary says, **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.” (Luke 1:46-47)**. Again, what an example for all of us. When good things come our way, our arrogant sinful nature looks to magnify or glorify self. We try not to say the quiet part out loud, but inwardly we assure ourselves that “the pat on the back,” or the promotion at work, or the gains we’ve enjoyed in the stock market, or success of our marriage, or the accomplishments of our kids, that any or all such things are somehow tied directly to our intellect, our talents, and our abilities, and can be rightly classified as the well-deserved fruit of our labors. Mary sees it all differently and properly.

She understands that her name will be forever linked to the birth of the Savior, but she sets the record straight – she is completely undeserving of this or any other honor. The fact that God has chosen her to carry the Christ-child and care for his needs till he comes of age doesn’t mean that she should be worshiped or glorified. In effect, she says, “Don’t call me worthy. Call me blessed!” In other words, “Call me the recipient of God’s undeserved love.” Mary knows that she has done nothing to earn her role. She confesses herself to be a sinful human being, in need of the very Savior to whom she will soon give birth. She is nothing other than God’s servant, selected by his grace to carry out a special, albeit difficult task that will require God’s help and strength every step of the way. And she will have that help. Why? How? **“...for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.” (Luke 1:49)**.

Mary’s trust is in the Mighty One who has done great things for her. He’s taken this sinner and called her to faith. How great is that! He’s used his power to deliver her from Satan’s grasp. How mighty is that! Will his goodness to her continue? Oh, yes! It must! Because holy is his name. All the good things that have happened to Mary have taken place not because of her sterling reputation,

but because of God's good and holy name. Mary can count on God to keep blessing her because his holiness is unchanging. His might is unfailing, and his love is eternal.

Dear Christians, for all these reasons and so many more, we too can count on God to bless us and keep us. Mary wants us to know that the love she was shown by God, flowed from a heart that had all of us in mind. She says: **“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.” (Luke 1:50-52).** There it is – God lifts up the lowly! We are the lowly. We know and confess this, not by our doing, but by God's might. By reason of the sin we inherited from our parents, we were born proud and arrogant. We imagined ourselves to be the masters of our fate and the captains of our soul. I suppose to some extent that was true. Left to ourselves, our fate was hell. We were on a collision course with eternal death. But in his great might, God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He sent his sinless Son into the world, wrapped in human flesh and blood. Our Lord Jesus, by the power that is his from all eternity, withstood every temptation of Satan, the same ones that trip us up every day. He overcame them all for us, in order to credit us with his perfect obedience. And then, in the greatest act of humility ever witnessed, Jesus hoisted onto his shoulders the weight of the world's sin. He carried all our sinful pride and arrogance and all the filth of every sinner ever into the depths of the devil's dungeon. There he suffered until sin's wages were paid in full and all the world was set free from sin's curse and power. Then, to prove his work was finished and that death has no power over him or us, he performed yet another mighty deed – he raised himself to life. All this he did for us! He lifted up us lowly sinners with his own mighty arm. And he continues to lift us up in his merciful love.

How blessed we are. God has shown mercy to each of us. Working through his Word and Sacrament, God's Spirit has scattered the inner most thoughts of us proud sinners. He has knocked us off the thrones we had set up in our hearts. He has brought us down low, not to bury us in the dust, but to raise us up from our self-destructive ways. He has shown us our sins, not to drive us to despair, but to turn us to him in repentance. He has exposed our self-righteousness for the sham it is and has poked holes in every excuse we make for our sinful thoughts and ways. He has done it all so that we may give up on every effort to help ourselves and instead lean only on him and his forgiveness to save us.

And save us he will – all the way to heaven. We can count on him for as Mary has told us: **“He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.” (Luke 1:54-55).** We are Abraham's descendants, because we are justified by faith as he was. This means there is never a moment in the day when God forgets about us. He constantly remembers you – always in love. Are you wrestling with some temptation that you can't overcome? Quit depending on your own strength. Turn to God's might and mercy for help. Are you humiliated by some sinful thing you've said or done? Do you wonder how you can ever be forgiven? Stop dwelling on your guilt. Turn to the promise of our Lord Jesus who said from the cross, “It is finished!” “I've paid for that sin. Forgiveness is yours in my name!” Is there some hurt you can't get past, some sorrow that has crippled you, some thorn in the flesh that you're living with? Life is filled with so many humbling reminders of how weak and unworthy we are. How often we just “wanna get away.” We can you know! We can flee to him who lifts up the lowly with his mighty arm in merciful love. We can trust that he's using even our greatest challenges and our most difficult days to bless us by giving us all the more reason to focus on his unbreakable promises and his unconditional love. Spend these last days of Advent humbly pondering, like Mary, all the blessings that are ours for time and eternity thanks to him who was born to be our Helper, our Savior Jesus. Amen.