

*In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

If you were to page through the introductory material in the front of the hymnal, you would find a church year calendar that lists the feasts, festivals and seasons of the church year. There is an event at the end of May that commemorates the events of our text today. We call it the Visitation, that time when Mary comes to visit with her cousin Elizabeth. The visit itself seems to be initiated by Gabriel, the angel who announced to Mary: *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.* (Luke 1:30-31 - ESV) Gabriel also told Mary that God had provided another sign of His power at work: *And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.*" (Luke 1:36-37 - ESV)

It should not surprise us that the young girl who does believe and trust what Gabriel has told her is still anxious to see her cousin—perhaps as a bit of reassurance in the midst of the great changes that are taking place in her life. So our text tells us that *Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* In and of itself, this event may not be much different from that which will be repeated in many homes this coming week, as family and friends take time to greet one another in the joy of the season. But it is the response of those in that house that catches our attention today. Mary speaks a simple word of greeting, and at the sound of her voice both Elizabeth and her unborn child are filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizing not just the mother of the Lord, but through her voice the very presence of Christ Himself with His people.

How do you react when you realize the presence of the Lord in your life? Do you have the humble attitude of Mary, or the joyous heart of Elizabeth? Do you leap for joy to know that the Lord is near you? On this last Sunday of Advent we hear His voice. We hear His Word, as He speaks to us to assure us He is with us. He comes to us with His physical presence in the Lord's Supper, so that we might know the power of His love and forgiveness. The Lord is with you! His voice is ringing in your ears! But what does that voice do for you?

I have always appreciated this simple, little account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, especially when we see the response of both Elizabeth and her unborn child in the presence of the Lord of Life. It never ceases to amaze me how the Holy Spirit can work in the hearts of all—yes, even in the hearts of the unborn. Mary speaks a word of greeting and John, still sheltered in the womb of his mother, leaps for joy. I know that many would see the baby's excitement as nothing more than a physical reaction to Elizabeth's excitement at seeing Mary. But Elizabeth is inspired by the Holy Spirit to know what has happened. More than that, she is also inspired to know what has happened to Mary. They didn't have email in those days, or cell phones or even telegraph. Mary didn't call ahead to tell Elizabeth she was coming. She hasn't had an opportunity to tell Elizabeth what has happened to her; that she is pregnant with the very Son of God. But Elizabeth knows. She knows Mary is pregnant. She knows about the angel. She even knows of Mary's humble acceptance of this awesome responsibility. She says: *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."*

The Holy Spirit led Elizabeth to this blessed knowledge. The Holy Spirit was in the heart of that unborn baby in Elizabeth's womb. For those who doubt that this is possible, we remember that Gabriel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth are going to have a son, and specifically noting that *he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.* (Luke 1:15 - ESV)

For all those who would doubt that infants can believe and who question the validity of infant Baptism on that basis, this text

assures us that the power of the Holy Spirit is not limited to a mind in a certain stage of development. Paul tells us: *no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.* (1 Corinthians 12:3 - ESV) This text also has something to say to those that think of the unborn only as embryos or fetuses, but not as truly human. The believing, Spirit-filled John is not just a blob of tissue, but in the view of God a child. And that child was also a sinner standing in need of God’s grace.

Now both Elizabeth and her child are in the presence of the Lord. They are led, by the Holy Spirit, to recognize His gracious presence with His people. Like Isaiah, who is given a glimpse of the throne of God, and who cries out: *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”* (Isaiah 6:5 - ESV), so Elizabeth is overwhelmed. *“Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”* Sin reminds us of our unworthiness of such a visitation. But God’s great love for us moves the heart to burst forth in joy, for we do know that in the Child of Mary, God has come to *save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21 - ESV), for that Child will give His life on the cross to pay for our sins, and rise again to give us life.

As we often find in the Scriptures, there is so much that we can see in these simple words. But today, our concern is this: what does that voice do for you? When you hear the voice of your Saviour in His Word, what feelings does that stir in your heart? So often we miss the presence of the Lord in our lives. We get so caught up in all the other things of the world that we can’t hear His voice over the din of the world. We miss Him in the midst of our day to day life. Maybe that is why there are times when we become indifferent in our prayers and our worship, or why we find ourselves merely going through the motions rather than responding with the great joy we have in Christ. It may also be the reason why so many find this season of the year so exhausting, because we haven’t heard the voice of the Lord that brings peace and hope, as He assures of the forgiveness and life we have through Him.

When God speaks, calling to you, assuring you of His presence, what does that voice do for you? Christ speaks to us in His Word to assure us of His grace for our lives. He calls us to turn from the sin that still clings to us and find the forgiveness that sets us free. He calls us to the joy that He gives—the joy of life in Him, both now and forever.

Leo Tolstoy tells the story of Martin, a shoemaker. He lived in a basement, in a little room with one window. Martin’s life had not been easy. His wife and children had died. He fell into despair, and even began to complain of God. Martin also ceased to go to church. But God worked to get Martin reading the Scriptures. In the Gospels, Martin found comfort from the Lord.

I encourage you to find the story and read it. It is too long to tell the story in this sermon. But Martin falls asleep one night reading the Gospel of Luke, when suddenly he heard a call: “Martin!” Martin started from his sleep. “Who is here?” There was no one at the door. Again he fell into a doze. Suddenly he plainly heard, “Martin! Look tomorrow on the street. I am coming.” Sure that it was the Lord who had spoken to him, Martin arose the next day, filled with joy and expectation, and eagerly prepares to greet the Lord. During the day Martin meets an old man, a younger woman and child; an old woman selling apples and the young boy she caught trying to steal an apple. He feels that they may distract him from being ready to greet the Lord, but in all three cases he invites the people in, helps them in their needs, and sends them on their way better than when they came into his shop.

At the end of the day, he is sad that the Lord did not come. Still, he opens his bible, planning to continue reading where he left off, but the Bible is opened to another place. As he glances at the words before him, he thinks he hears a sound, and looks behind him. It seems as though several people are standing in the corner. And a voice whispered in his ear: “Martin! Did you not recognize me?”

“Who?”, Martin asks. “Me,” replied the voice. “It is I”; and the old man stepped forth from the dark corner; he smiled, and like a little cloud faded away, and soon vanished. “And this is I,” said the voice. From the dark corner stepped forth the woman with her child: the woman smiled, the child laughed, and they also vanished. “And this is I,” continued the voice; both the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped forward; both smiled and vanished.

Martin’s soul rejoiced: he crossed himself, put on his eyeglasses, and began to read the Gospel where it happened to open. On the upper part of the page he read: *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ... ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’* (Matthew 25:35-36, 40 - ESV)

What does that voice do for you? The voice of the Saviour came to John and Elizabeth through the voice of Mary and they felt the joy, peace and the honour of His royal presence. They surrendered their hearts to Him who would give His life for the sins

of the world on the cross. They rejoiced in the One who is life for those who trust in Him. Martin, the shoemaker, found joy in His voice, heard through his visitors. He lived and cared and shared in the joy of that Lord. We are blessed to hear His voice as the Spirit works in the Word and in the Sacraments. Listen, dear people loved by God! Rejoice in His Word and live in the power of His love, as His voice assures you of all He has done, is doing and will do for you this Advent and Christmas time and forever! Amen.