

Advent's Unusual Suspects: Elizabeth and Mary

Luke 1: 39-45

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[Pray]

Please open your Bibles to Luke chapter 1. You will find this on page 724 if you are using the Bible in the pew in front of you.

If you've been with us over the last couple weeks you know that we are in the middle of the season of Advent and have been looking at how the Christian Christmas story combines elements common in the greatest myths – so angels, miracles and God influencing the outcome of the world. And it combines this with some of the most unusually common people and places you can imagine.¹

So two weeks ago we touched on the old doubting priest Zechariah and his emotionally wounded and barren wife Elizabeth. Two people no one would expect to see wrapped up in the center of God's plan. And yet an angel showed up and gave them the good news that they would have a son who would be the forerunner for the Saviour.

And then last week we looked at the hicksville town of Nazareth at the end of a dusty road in Northern Israel. This is not the kind of place God should have a plan for, but He did. And we looked at Mary, a child and a woman, so an underappreciated member of first century society. And yet God sent Gabriel with the news that she had been selected – not because she was great, but by grace – to participate with God in the greatest aspect of His involvement in human history of all time. She would become God's mom.

And after this incredible encounter, verse 38 simply says "the angel left her," and we will come back to that. But look now at verse 39. It reads:

[Read Luke 1:39-40]

Can you sense Mary's excitement? The angel leaves and "at that time" Mary throws her shoes on and heads out the door to visit her old cousin – no, her "advanced in age" cousin, Elizabeth.

She's stoked! Friends, it is incredibly exciting to participate in what God is doing. Amen? This is one of the biggest blessings He gives us. And it is incredibly encouraging to share this with other people who are partnering with God.

¹ Outline and some content adapted from Mark Clark <http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/an-unlikely-tale-mary-elizabeth/> (Accessed December 9, 2015)

And this is where Mary is at. God has given her the opportunity to join Him, she's embraced it, and now she is encouraging herself by connecting with someone else God is working through.

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Now I wonder, have you ever felt God calling you to do something and tried talking about it with someone who lacked faith? If you have you know that it is incredibly discouraging. They can't seem to get it and more likely than not try to talk you out of it as well.

So usually when you get pregnant your first visit is to your parents – right? I can still remember the work Nikki and I put into creatively telling our folks we were finally pregnant with our first, but the text doesn't even mention Mary's conversation with her folks because you can imagine how unsupportive they would have been – virgin birth? Yeah right!

But this is almost always the way it goes when God starts working in a person's life. He always asks us to step out in faith. And faith in action never makes sense to those who don't have it.

So some of you know that I'm a landlord and have a couple rental properties. Now most of the time it is business as usual, but the other day I had a tenant tell me he was moving out in two weeks. Now the law says you have to give a month's notice. So at first I told him that I wouldn't be giving him his deposit back because I was going to lose a month's rent – and he was fine with that. But then a day later as I was praying I felt God tell me that I should return it in full. Now I didn't hear a voice from heaven so I thought it could be just me – and since it was going to cost me \$600 I decided I needed some counsel.

Now I have a couple mentors that I go to with business questions because they know more about business than I do. But as I was considering what I should do I didn't go to them because I know the answer they will give me – they get business, but they don't get faith. So instead I went to my wife. And without even batting an eye, even though the money was going to come out of our pocket she said "if you think God is telling you to do this then you do it."

And so I called up my tenant, and shocked him with the words "Jesus told me He wants to provide for you and I'm supposed to give you your deposit back."

Now to my business mentor this decision is foolish, but I take confidence in knowing that even if this thought didn't come from God when I am standing before Him on judgment day He won't say "I can't believe you foolishly gave that money back because you thought I wanted you to do it. You just wasted \$600 of My money now what am I going to do? It just won't happen that way. And my wife gets this and so was able to encourage me to step out in faith.

And its for similar encouragement that Mary goes to Elizabeth. And the response she gets is understandably faith filled. Look at verse 41.

[Read Luke 1:41]

So baby John the Baptist recognizes His Lord even before Jesus is born. And Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit simply at the sound of Mary's voice.

Now if you have spent much time in church you are familiar with talk about the Holy Spirit, but talking about it doesn't mean we understand – this is a difficult subject.

So the Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity – so God – and He comes to live within everyone who trusts in Jesus. So the Apostle Paul tells us:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13)

So today everyone who puts their faith in Jesus gets the Holy Spirit. But this isn't the way it always worked. In the Old Testament the Spirit chose specific people and filled them so that they could accomplish specific tasks.

So God gave "some of His Spirit" to the elders Moses chose so they could help him lead the people.² And the Holy Spirit "clothed Gideon" with favor so that Israel would follow him.³ And the Holy Spirit "came upon" Sampson giving him super human strength.⁴ And there are lots of other examples of people being filled with the Spirit, but when the task was finished, the Spirit would leave. That was in the Old Testament.

But there was a prophecy that things were going to change. A time was coming when God would dwell in all His people permanently. God said:

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. (Joel 2:28)

And Luke is excited about this and so talks about the Holy Spirit more than any of the other Gospel writer. He wants us to know that because of Jesus we can all be filled with the Holy Spirit like Elizabeth was.

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Now we spend a lot of time talking about Jesus – and rightfully so – but we tend to neglect the Holy Spirit. And so there is confusion about how to be filled with the Spirit and what He does in us.

² Numbers 11:17

³ Judges 6:34

⁴ Judges 14:6

And so many of us go through life struggling with financial pressures and marriage struggles and sin temptations that we just can't get rid of. And we are frustrated that we just can't seem to overcome. No matter how hard we work it always feels like we are trying to suck the air out of a cup with a straw. It's a fruitless endeavor, more air always gets in. But Luke says there is another option, we can be filled with the Spirit. And when we are it's like our cup gets filled with water and all the air is displaced automatically.

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But we mentioned last week that there is a difference between having the Spirit and being filled with Him. Some people are obviously full of His presence and have His joy abounding from their lives, while others scrape by without much evidence of His involvement at all – you know those two kinds of Christians right? Some are full of Jesus' love and joy and peace and patience and kindness, and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self control.⁵ But this can't be said about every Christian because being filled with the Spirit doesn't happen by default.

So imagine that you won one of those Gas sweepstakes and were awarded free fuel for life from Chevron. But then instead of cashing in on it you decided to fill up at Petro-Can all the time. In the end no matter how much you talked about your prize it would be worthless to you.

And in a similar way, while everyone receives the Holy Spirit when they come to Christ, many don't pursue being filled by Him and so never enjoy living free from bondage to sin. So we have a choice. Paul writes:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16)

But how do we do this? How do we walk by the Spirit?

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There are lots of scripture passages that speak to this, but Romans 8 is probably the most compact section of text about what it means to live directed by the Spirit. I'll give you two thoughts from that chapter and I've put a link in the footnotes that you can follow for more.⁶ So first we read:

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. (Romans 8:5)

⁵ Galatians 5:22

⁶ See <https://www.crossway.org/blog/2012/03/7-steps-to-walking-the-spiritual-walk/> (Accessed December 12, 2015)

So if you want to walk by the Spirit and enjoy a life empowered by the Spirit it matters what you spend your time thinking about. If you continually fill your mind with the lusts of the flesh – whatever those are for you – then you are going to find yourself powerless to overcome the flesh. But if you set your mind on what the Spirit desires you will receive His power. So get into your Bible even if it's not fun. And set time aside for prayer, and surround yourself with people of faith who are going to spur you on instead of hold you back. Set your mind on the Spirit.

Second Paul writes:

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.
(Romans 8:13)

So after you set your mind on the Spirit prepare for action. It is those who **do** what Jesus says who are filled by His Spirit and live. So that means we have to put to death the deeds of the body in order to walk in Jesus' Spirit; we can't keep giving in to temptation, we have to act on our conviction and reject it.

So to live by the Spirit requires that we set our minds on Him and obey. But what does the Spirit do in a person?

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Well the Bible tells us He does several things. So first He regenerates us.

Now the word "regeneration" refers to us being re-birthed, and this happens when we become Christians. So Jesus told Nicodemus that we can't enter the Kingdom of God naturally because we are born in sin.⁷ We are all sinners who need to be re-born.

Now I was listening to the CBC the other day and someone came on and espoused a popular belief saying "I believe all people are basically good." But the Bible says that's a lie and really anyone with small children can testify to this.

So Nikki and I have worked really hard to train our kids to be polite and share and forgive each other and say sorry and all sorts of other good things. And then we stand back and watch how the default is just the opposite. So the other day we blew up some balloons and every kid got a different color. And then we watched how when given the opportunity one kid will grab the other kid's balloon and run away with it. Who taught them how to do this! And if we don't intervene then within about 3 minutes hair will be getting pulled and people will be getting bit, eyes will be getting poked and blood will start to run. The fact is the doctrines of original sin and total depravity are pretty easy sells at my house. If you don't believe me, sign up to babysit sometime.

So the Holy Spirit regenerates us, changing our sinful nature. But how?

⁷ John 3:5-8

Well, there are two levels to this process, one that we do and one that goes on below the surface. So when we are convicted of sin and come to Christ in repentance we speak of “receiving Him” and becoming a Christian. And when we say this we rightly recognize that this is our response of faith – we do this.

But at a deeper level the Scriptures also talk about us becoming children of God when we are saved.⁸ And anyone who knows where babies come from knows that they don’t have any choice in the matter. We don’t get to choose what family or country we get born into; we just get stuck with what we get. And so since the Holy Spirit makes us God’s children He gets all the credit for us coming to God. He is the one who regenerates us. That’s the first thing the Spirit does.

The second thing the Holy Spirit does is empower people. And by empower I mean cause us to live in a way that rises above our natural ability.

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Pastor Kim doesn’t know I’m going to say this, but she is an example of a person empowered by the Holy Spirit. When your spouse dies, especially unexpectedly, it is natural to struggle with doubt and grow depressed. It is natural to feel sorry for yourself and mope about. It is natural to get angry and grow bitter. This is what normal people do. But over the course of the last year I’ve watched Kim have real emotions, but continually choose to find her strength in God and continue to press in and be conformed to Christ’s image in spite of some incredible difficulties that have been thrown her way even after Nathan’s passing.

Now she hasn’t managed this because she is a great person, it’s because she is full of the Holy Spirit, and this is what the Holy Spirit does in a person when He fills them. He causes them to live in joy in spite of their circumstances.

And this is what true life is. So ask yourself, do I want to enjoy a full life regardless of what gets thrown at me? Do I want to have joy that doesn’t go up and down depending on what happens at work or in my family and is not destroyed by sickness or financial trouble? If you do then pursue the Holy Spirit.

So Paul tells us:

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. (Ephesians 5:18-19)

And

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... and be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. (Colossians 3:15-16)

⁸ John 1:12

So Paul commands us to “be filled with the Spirit” and surround ourselves with people that we can encourage and be encouraged by to this same end because if you are a Christian enjoying the Spirit’s empowerment requires our decision to pursue Him.

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A third thing the Holy Spirit does is sanctifies us, or conforms us to the image of Christ. So when we are saved we are justified, which means we are made right with God. But that is when sanctification begins. And there is more to sanctification than simply sinning less and less.

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John Owen, the 17th century puritan once said our goal as Christian men should not be to stop lusting. So whenever you see an attractive woman don’t just look at the floor to avoid dehumanizing her as a lump of beautiful flesh. Instead raise her up recognizing that she bears God’s image. And perhaps more for the ladies, though men can get wrapped up in this too, don’t just stop gossiping, start speaking positively about people behind their backs.

You see the goal is not to avoid sin; God wants us to actively look like Christ.⁹ And its as we work with the Holy Spirit that this happens – we are sanctified.

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So the Holy Spirit regenerates us causing us to become children of God, and He empowers us to rise above our natural tendencies, and He sanctifies us so that we look like Jesus.

And Luke tells us Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was bubbling out of her all over the place. And being full of the Spirit leads her to act a certain way. So look at verse 42.

[Read Luke 1:42-45]

So Elizabeth does a few things here.

First she blesses Mary and her coming child Jesus. Now we might just skim over these words without thinking much of them, but they are pretty significant. Notice what Elizabeth doesn’t do. She doesn’t get jealous of Mary for surpassing her.

Do you ever find that when something really good happens to someone beside you it is easy to get jealous? So just think about it, for the last six months Elizabeth has been the talk of the town. An angel has visited her. And she miraculously got pregnant. And her shame was taken away. This was the best year of her life for sure.

⁹ Romans 8:29

And then when Mary enters the room she is completely out done. Not only did Gabriel come to Mary as well, but Mary didn't just have a miraculous pregnancy she had a virgin pregnancy! And sure Elizabeth's baby would be a prophet, but Mary's baby was going to be God!... Have you ever had something good and then watched someone else get something way better?

In a moment like this it would have been really easy to compare herself with Mary and forgot all about her own blessing. But Elizabeth is full of the Spirit. And so she does what is not natural and gushes genuine happiness for Mary. She calls her blessed three times and the only way to picture her is with a huge smile stretching across her face.

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The second thing Elizabeth does is passionately respond to God's salvation. Verse 42 describes her speaking "In a loud voice."

So Elizabeth isn't quiet and reserved about what is going on. She has a vibrant faith that shows itself in her emotions.

And think about it, God has shown up in her life and in her family and she is overjoyed. So are you overjoyed that God is at work around you? If yes, how do you show this? So think about the way you act when you are most excited about something. Perhaps that's at a hockey game or when your kids come to visit or when you receive good news from the doctor or whatever it is for you.

And now think about the way you relate to God in worship. Do your actions demonstrate a greater level of passion for Him than you show for other things? Is Jesus your greatest treasure? Or have the things of this world become your treasure?

Jesus says:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)

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And this brings us to the third thing Elizabeth does which is worship.

Now worship has been defined as the "act of ascribing worth directly to God" and humbling ourselves in the process.¹⁰ So Elizabeth says "Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" She refers to the unborn Jesus as her Lord and in the same sentence recognizes where she weighs in – she has been favored, or has received grace she doesn't deserve. This is worship.

And interestingly her son John the Baptist expands on this giving the most succinct statement of worship in the entire Bible. He says:

[Jesus] must increase and I must decrease. (John 3:30)

¹⁰ James MacDonald "Vertical Church" (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Pub Co), 2012. pg 168.

So is this the way you relate to God? Are you following Him hoping to get Him to work for you? Do you want Him to bless the plans you have and the things you are doing? Or are you following God because you want to be part of His plan to increase His kingdom and expand His glory? Is it about you, or is it about Him? Are you a worshipper like Elizabeth?

Now perhaps emotion doesn't come easy to you, but worship of God is not **natural** for any of us. SO choose to be passionate about who God is and what He has done for you. Choose to ascribe to Him the worth He is due.

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I want to close by coming back to the last words in verse 38. It reads:

[Read Luke 1:38]

The last words of the verse are what I want to focus on.

Friends, we live in a broken world where terrorism reigns and people live controlled by fear and enslaved to consumerism. And the message of our world is this is just the reality. We can fight it, but we can never really overcome it because this is just life.

But verse 38 prepares us to sing a different tune. It says actually the world we live in is only a partial shadow of reality. There is in fact a much more real world than the one we see with our physical eyes. In reality there is a God whose Holy Spirit is active in this world, and He has an army of angels that He uses to change the course of history. That's reality.

And this is the deep hope that those of us who have placed our faith in the God of Christmas get to enjoy. This hope is one that takes away the need to be afraid when terrorists strike. It takes away the need to find our meaning in buying new things like the ads demand. It takes away the need to define ourselves the way the world does. And in the place of all these things it gives us content we be passionate about.

So as Christmas comes pursue the filling of the Holy Spirit, and pray that Jesus will open your eyes afresh to His reality and put a song of passionate worship in your heart. Do this because the miracles of this account aren't just a great story, they are the promise of the life God wants us to experience ourselves.