

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Advent 4

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

***It makes you want to sing!***

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary got up and hurried to the hill country, to a town of Judah. <sup>40</sup> She entered the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> Just as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> She called out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> In fact, just now, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy! <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!"

<sup>46</sup> Then Mary said,

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.

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

<sup>49</sup> because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones.

He has lifted up the lowly.

<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.

—Luke 1:39-55

You know the feeling!

You are having an awesome day. Everything is going so well. Maybe you just finished your Christmas shopping, and after much searching you found the perfect gift for that special someone, and you can't wait to see the look on their face when you give it to them. Maybe you just aced the last exam of the semester, and your grades are looking really good. Maybe you just got news of the birth of a new grandchild. Whatever it is, it's such a great day you are euphoric. You find yourself tapping your toe to the beat of the music you're listening to. Maybe you're immersed in your AirPods, and someone nearby catches you singing out loud, even though you don't realize it. Christmas music on the radio, you're singing along. Regardless of the place and regardless of the reason, there's a song in your heart, and it flows off your lips. (Even we of English, German and Scandinavian descent, who understand that emotions must be kept under wraps, are moved to let loose.) Sometimes you just have to sing!

People throughout the Scriptures felt the same way. There are numerous examples where God's people responded to something great with a song of praise to God. Miriam sang her song praising God after the Lord brought Israel through the Red Sea and destroyed the chariots and armies of Pharaoh. Deborah sang a song as she reveled in God's victory over the Canaanites. We think of the First Song of Isaiah and the Song of Zechariah. It's just natural! When the Lord gives you a great day, you just have to sing.

So what did Mary have to sing about? Very simply, the Virgin Mary had received the most astounding, wonderful, miraculous news that any human being could ever possibly receive. We don't know how old Mary was when the Angel Gabriel visited her in Nazareth and told her she would be the mother of the Savior of the world, but we imagine her probably to be in her teens. (We surmise that because we know that girls married younger in those days, and Mary was around and involved in the Christian Church long after Jesus ascended into heaven.) She was almost certainly a young woman. She was a virgin; she had never known a man. She had no union with Joseph until after Jesus was born. The child conceived in her was a miracle worked by God himself. Gabriel had told her that her child was none other than the Son of God himself!

Now Mary goes to Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Do you think she was brimming with excitement and overflowing with joy? Can you picture her ready to explode with a song of praise to God?

There are two ways we can praise God. We can tell God who he is: God you're majestic, gracious, powerful, almighty, loving; we can praise him for his attributes, his characteristics. And we can praise God for what he has done. This is what Mary does: she praises God for what he has done. Her song is full of the gospel, the Good News that God is coming to save sinners and rescue his people.

Praise God! He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. We don't imagine Mary to come from wealth. She was not rich. She was a woman in humble circumstances, perhaps even poverty. But when Mary praises God for being mindful of the humble state of his servant, she's not just talking about whether she was a humble girl from a humble family. She recognized that there's a lot more to being humble than how much money you have and what kind of car you drive and what kind of house you live in and whom you know and hang out with. She recognized that the human condition is one of frailty and humility. The humble whom God is coming to save are human beings who recognize that we are born in weakness. We come into this world naked, we experience pain, disease, injury, loss. And finally we must return to dust. Because of our sins we must die and answer to God. Talk about humility, death is the most humiliating thing that happens to a human being. The proud that God scatters are those who ignore this reality. They think this life is all there is. They live for now. For them it's about having more, getting ahead, gaining prestige in the eyes of the world. It's about money, power and pleasure. They proudly declare that they will never answer to anyone; they are the masters of their own destiny, the captains of their soul. How silly, foolish and shortsighted! As if money and power ever lasted for anyone! A medical professional said to me recently, "I've zipped people into body bags before, and there's never anything that goes in there with them." Mary herself was a humble girl from the backwater town of Nazareth, of no noble birth. But it didn't matter because she had God on her side, and all the wealth and power in the world couldn't begin to compare to having the power of the Mighty One do great things for her, choosing her to be the mother of the Savior of the world, coming to rescue us all from death and damnation. Do you think that's something to sing about? The death of death itself, the opening the gates of heaven to all who fear God, the gift of immortality? It makes you want to sing!

Praise God! "The Mighty One has done great things for me," Mary sang. God is all-powerful. He does whatever pleases him. And what pleased him in the fullness of time was to take on human flesh, to be conceived in the womb of a virgin, in meekness and in humility, and in this weakness and poverty to exercise all the power of his grace. That's how God exercises his power in the greatest most wonderful way. God can split rocks and make the earth tremble. He can hurl thunderbolts and terrify the wicked whenever he feels like it. He can raise up empires and topple rulers from their thrones with a word. But when it comes to the greatest and mightiest act of deliverance, God does something completely unexpected. He is born and comes into the world naked like every human being. He knows poverty and pain, sorrow, thirst. Finally in utter humiliation he is nailed to a cross to be reviled by every passer-by. And on the cross the Mighty God dies, his blood poured out as the infinite sacrifice for countless sins. And in that ultimate act of shame, God wins the greatest eternal victory: Satan is conquered. Sin is paid for. Hell is stripped of its power. Death itself is swallowed up in life as God rises from the grave on the third day. In God's greatest victory, grace triumphs! God's greatest glory is in his saving grace. No wonder Mary sang, "The Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name." Grace like that makes you want to sing!

Praise God! He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers. Was there every any doubt? Was there ever any question whether God would deliver on his promise, fulfill his covenant that he had made thousands of years before and reiterated so many times to God's people through the prophets? God has remembered to be merciful to this stiff-necked and rebellious people descended from Abraham, and his mercy extends from generation to generation. When you have a God who keeps his promises and delivers on his covenant and sends the promised Savior, it makes you want to sing!

One of the things I appreciate about our congregation is how much we like to sing. Of course I often get the benefit of sitting up in front and hearing all your singing voices directed toward the front of the sanctuary. The sound is really good up here; when you sing it's a beautiful chorus of praise. When we introduce a new hymn or psalm it's not long before God's people here are singing it with gusto. There are many times when I think, "God's people can sing!" It's not hard to figure out why. When we have a God who loves us and gives his life for us, when we have a Savior who has rescued us, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit who lives in us and makes our bodies his temple, we have so many things to be thankful for, so many things to celebrate, it just makes us want to sing.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent, the last Sunday before we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We are all looking forward to Christmas. We love the lights, the celebrations, the food, the family, the good times, the worship services. It's a wonderful time of the year, and it is all so special and meaningful. Yet as we know, all those things

are insignificant to what we really celebrate: the incarnation of God. God coming to help and rescue his people. God becoming our brother. God walking in our shoes. God experiencing our pain to deliver us from pain forever. If I were to pick one passage of the Scripture that most powerfully captures the essence of the incredible mystery of Christmas it would be John 1:18: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the only-begotten, who came from the Father full of grace and truth." It makes you want to sing!

Okay, maybe it's not an incredibly awesome day. Maybe you're not feeling euphoric. Maybe it even seems like things aren't going well at all. Well, friends, the nice thing about being a Christian is it doesn't have to be an incredibly awesome day for you to have praise on your lips and a song in your heart. That's because regardless of whatever circumstances you find yourself in, you can praise God for gifts that are greater than anything that this world can offer and that no one can take away from you: God's love for you in Jesus. Forgiveness for your sins. Life with Jesus forever in heaven. A promise and hope to hold onto in this life, and joy for all eternity.

That's something to sing about! Amen.