

Loves Even Me

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 what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ 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 merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

(Luke 1:39-55)

My favorite childhood song goes like this: **"God loves me dearly, grants me salvation; God loves me dearly, loves even me. Therefore I'll say again: God loves me dearly, God loves me dearly, loves even me."** And what gets me every time (quite frankly, cuts me to the core) are those three words **"loves even me."** Do you relate in any way?

Who can comprehend God's love for sinners? Who can reason God's love for those who have shown him so little love in return? Who can fathom God's love for those who have resisted him and gone against him? But greater than all of that, who can make sense of God's love for "even me." Isn't the love God has for us all the "un" words you can think of: unimaginable, unexpected, unmerited, undeserved? And yet, I hope the Holy Spirit also assures you that God's love is undeniable.

In our Gospel lesson today, "even me" is exactly what cut Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the core as well.

First, look at Elizabeth. Remember, Elizabeth was said to be barren. In other words, there seemed to be no hope for her to have children. And yet, because nothing is impossible with God, she becomes pregnant and is in her sixth month. That is what the angel Gabriel had told Mary in the previous verses, so that Mary hurries to see Elizabeth. But when Mary arrives, is Elizabeth's

miracle baby the topic of discussion or is Mary's miracle baby the topic of discussion? Listen again to what Elizabeth said: **"But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"** Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knows exactly who was conceived within Mary and is completely taken back that Mary would come to visit her, carrying the Lord in her womb. Even the child within Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy over it.

Now put this in perspective. Elizabeth's pregnancy was no less a miracle and did not lack importance. The child conceived in her would fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of the one who would come to prepare the way for the Lord. But to Elizabeth, her pregnancy paled in comparison to Mary's pregnancy for this one reason: Elizabeth knew exactly who was growing in Mary's womb and appropriately "hails the incarnate deity."

Elizabeth also acknowledges the mission of the incarnate deity. Listen to verse 45: (Elizabeth said to Mary), **"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"** What would be accomplished? Jesus would live up to his name and save the people from their sins. In other words, Elizabeth understands that the child within Mary's womb is the Christ-child who has broken into history to accomplish God's master plan of salvation for a world of sinful human beings. The waiting is over. The Messiah is here. The promise to Abraham is being fulfilled. That personal understanding of who Jesus is and why Jesus came is ultimately what leads Elizabeth to exclaim: **"Why am I so favored?"** She couldn't get over the fact that Christ the Lord, in whose presence she stood, came for even her.

And Mary felt no differently. Moved by Elizabeth's divinely inspired words, she herself breaks out into song. She 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. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name."** Do you hear Mary's wonder of "even me" in her words?

As Mary reflects on what her pregnancy means for her and for her people, her entire being is moved to praise her almighty God. In her own words, you can hear the sense of her sinfulness when she calls God her Savior, and you can hear the recognition of her lowliness, when she sits in awe of what God has done for her. She never expected any of this. It was overwhelming and unimaginable. Such love! Such grace! Such power! To even her – an ordinary, lowly virgin.

Now take Mary and Elizabeth together. At the time, who else could Mary have shared her news with but Elizabeth? Again, emphasizing "at the time" this is all taking place, would Joseph have understood? Would her family have understood? Would the people in her town of Nazareth have understood? But think about it, by God's grace and power, we do, even 2000 year later. And there's the lesson you and I want to learn from Elizabeth and Mary: May we never lose the wonder and awe Elizabeth and Mary had, overwhelmed by the grace and favor God has personally shown each of us, even us, so that we know who is in Mary's womb and why he came.

Oh yes, don't forget the why he came. Listen again to what Mary said in verses 51-53: **"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered the proud in their inmost thoughts. He**

has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich empty away."

Mary's words, oddly enough, remind me of what Jesus said in Luke 12:51: **"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, division."** That division is seen between those who believe and those who don't, between those who are humble and those who are proud, between those who confess their need for a Savior and those who stand on their own deeds and righteousness. Those who believe, are humble, and repent are those who will be lifted up and filled with all the good things God has to offer. Those who don't believe, are proud, and think they got it all together will be scattered and left empty. So where are you?

Are you the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who knew their sin but walked away from the forgiveness Jesus came to bring? Or are you the adulterous woman who knew she deserved to be stoned but instead received Jesus' forgiveness? Are you the rich young ruler, who refused to give up his love for earthly things? Or are you Zacchaeus who basically gave everything away because the forgiveness Jesus gave to him mattered more? Are you the one thief on the cross, who continued to hurl insults at Jesus and ended up dying a hopeless death? Or are you the other thief, who knew he was receiving what he deserved and ended up in paradise? In comparison to the questions I have just asked you, do you see the difference between "look at me" and "even me"? Now maybe you have a deeper understanding of why it is said to **"Keep Christ in Christmas."**

Christmas is not about us, but about Christ the Lord and what he came to do for us. Slightly different than Elizabeth and Mary but nonetheless amazing, our praise of him today is not in what he would accomplish, but in what he has accomplished. As a result, my favorite childhood song has a second verse: **"Jesus, my Savior, himself did offer; Jesus, my Savior, paid all I owed. Therefore I'll say again: God loves me dearly, God loves me dearly, (say it with me!) loves even me."** Yes, undeniably loves even you. Merry Christmas. Amen.