

Sermon Advent 4 2018
December 23, 2018
Luke 1:39-56

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

Within the past couple of weeks you've maybe heard about a bit of a to-do that was in the news regarding comedian Kevin Hart and hosting the Oscars. Now, in the big scheme of things who hosts the Oscars and who doesn't really isn't going to have much bearing on our lives as Christians, but the to-do was noteworthy because of what it reflects. You see what happened was that there was a time when Kevin Hart as a comedian did a routine where he made light of the fact of his worry that his son would grow up to be gay. If I recall this routine was something that he even did in the 2000's and hadn't really continued to this day. However, when he was asked to host this year, then, there were people who dug up this routine and made sure it was seen as an utter embarrassment.

As I say this, this sort of thing isn't unique, is it? Things have reached the point where you'll have a comedian like Jerry Seinfeld who will not perform at college campuses due to such concerns. Or somewhat more akin to things from the past coming to haunt people, you hear of college athletes who have tweets from High School resurrected demonstrating their accused "racism," or "sexism," or "homophobia." These are things that had been said, left in the past, and in a number of cases the people would make sure not to say such things now. But the result is that when something is said it is never forgotten.

Now, we can discuss the issues of how some of the things that people get upset about, like racism, we would agree are great wrongs, and how there are other things, like a corrupted sexual ethic altogether, which we need to confess against, but the greater matter is something else. Underlying it is that as we don't forget words, the judgment of those words and of the past reflects something. On the one hand it reflects that words do something and that's very important. But on the other, the problem is that there is an extreme self-righteousness about it. So many of us have put ourselves as judge and jury of others and even history. As I say that then, that there is this attitude, this self-righteousness, what do we always know that comes from? Pride and arrogance, right? The implication is that we are better people than all those who came before us, because we are more enlightened and much smarter.

But in our lesson this morning, we hear speaking of a word that also does something, but in a different light. What do we see? Well we have Mary coming to visit her cousin Elizabeth. We have the mother of our Lord pregnant with Jesus going to visit Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. And as we see this scene, we have Mary coming and Luke tells us that she greets Elizabeth. Now that greeting would have been something including the blessing of peace: "Shalom, Peace to you." As that was spoken, the word brought the peace of the Lord to Elizabeth, and to her unborn child. Look at what Elizabeth says. Luke tells us that she was filled with the Holy Spirit and said, "**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 fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.**" Do you hear what that greeting from Mary did? It filled Elizabeth with joy, it also filled her with the Holy Spirit, and it filled the heart of her child with exaltation and praise. This word was spoken, and it's speaking did what it said. It brought that peace, brought the joy, brought the comfort of our Lord to Elizabeth and the John.

But as this word Elizabeth is filled what does she then say about Mary? Mary is blessed. Mary is blessed because she likewise had a word spoken to her. The Angel had come to her, he had spoken the promise that she would be with child, bearing Him and naming Him Jesus. When asked how this would be because of Mary's exemplary chastity, he told her that the same Spirit would come and overshadow her. What was her response to this? "Let it be to me according to your word." She gave her amen, her trust, her assent to that word. And Elizabeth tells us she was blessed. Again, she says, "**blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.**"

Now we should take a minute to understand this speaking from the Lord and its fulfillment. We should understand just what it means. On the one hand we see Mary assenting to the Word of the Lord, seeing the amazing gift that she was given to be the mother of the Christ. And as I say that I don't know if we can fathom just how that would have felt. You know we talk about Mary, and we talk about her example, her faith, her obedience. But think about just what this would have meant. This would have been not only earth shattering, but to have the God who created the whole Universe tell you that you would bear His Son? Again, I don't think we can fathom that. And by six months she obviously knew that this was very real and she would be giving birth to Him before too long. So there's that fulfillment in which she trusted.

But you have to understand that it's also so much more than that. This fulfillment is something she gets as she sings her song, that song we call the Magnificat. "My soul magnifies the Lord." Look at the end of that. She makes a connection there that shows just how much she understands of this fulfillment when she says, "**He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.**" You see Mary got it. The Old Testament was all leading up to it. This child in her womb was that fulfillment of the whole Old Testament. He was the One promised to Abraham such that Abraham would be the father of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and this Son she was having would bring that about. She knew that this Jesus would be even the One promised all the way at the Fall into Sin, the Offspring of Woman. She knew that promise, she believed the Word and its fulfillment came to her and brought blessing to her.

Of course as we look at this Word doing what it does, to connect back to what we said about words doing things today, there is a stark, stark difference, isn't there? I mentioned the pride and arrogance that mark our attitude with words today, a pride and arrogance where we judge those words, but what does Mary do? Does she respond with that? No, she responds in humility. That word comes and she stand under it. She doesn't critique, she doesn't question it, she stands under it. In fact, even as we were looking at this greeting, something worth noting is what that greeting meant. What's that?

Well, you see, the greeting was an important cultural thing for the Jews at that time. It was culturally understood that the person who gave the greeting was showing honor to the person they were greeting. In other words it was an honor to receive the greeting. The other person was putting themselves below you as they did that. If you remember, Jesus censured the Pharisees for their desire to receive greetings in the marketplace. Why? The person who was greeted first was the honored one. It was an honor to receive that greeting. As Mary greeted Elizabeth- she spoke first. Yet who is she? Mother of Lord! You can see why Elizabeth responded with such awe. "Who am I that the mother of my Lord should greet me?!" "Who am I that the mother of the Christ should speak the Lord's peace to me, I should speak it to her!!" But Mary didn't flinch. She was humble, in fact she sang about it then, and proved the Lord's greatness and not her own in this.

So what do we see in this? We see a call for our own humility. We have such arrogance about words, we seek to stand over the Lord's words and judge them. We seek to be the ones who in our intelligence show how much we know more than the Scriptures. We seek to be the ones who put others down because of their words. Sure we might not have the same concerns as the culture around us, but we do just what they do with others, don't we? We exhibit our own self-righteousness, our own arrogance. And we must take care. Hear the warnings about self-righteousness, about arrogance: **"he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones..., and the rich he has sent away empty."**

That warning is humbling, isn't it? It's humbling because of who this God is. It's humbling because who really is strong? Us? No, He is. Just like Mary pointed out. And when it comes to our own arrogance, our own false sense of power and ability to be self-righteous, that's not humility. And that should scare us. It should scare us when we don't stand under that Word like Mary did.

But as we hear of that fulfillment too, we hear of what He does for those who are humbled under that word. Listen to that promise: **"And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation... [He has] exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things... He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy."** And Christians, that remembrance is manifest to us. It's manifest not in this humble Mary, but in her child; not in her example for us, but His whole life, not just example. But look at that humble One. Look at that Humble Child, whose birth we'll be celebrating Tuesday. Look at that Humble Child who was laid in a manger with swaddling cloth. Look at the Humble Man that child became. The Humble One who gave up the glories of heaven out of His love for you, and His willingness to see you as greater than He. Look at this Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross scorning its shame. Look at Jesus who was raised for your life. Talk about humility. But that is what He has done for you.

And He is the One then, who speaks the greatest word of all to stand under, the greatest word which does what it says, "I forgive you all of your sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "This is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins."

Yes this is the greatest Word and it has been spoken to you to cleanse you and make you anew. Stand under that word in humility. Stand under it and believe in its fulfillment. And as you do so, know the grace that is yours so that you may extend that same grace to the world. That is what humility does, and we see that in Jesus above all. The humble Jesus who stood under God's Word perfectly, who was born in the manger and died on the cross. All for you. Amen.