

The Feast of the Visitation
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

FAITH OVER REASON

I Peter 3:1-5a; Luke 1:39-56

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

In the Epistle for today, St. Peter, in giving direction to wives, calls to our attention the holy women of former times. These women, he says, were not notable on account of their beauty or fine clothing, but on account of what he calls “the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” And he says, “For in this manner... the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves.” That is, they were adorned with faith; that trust in God and His salvation which makes them holy and which bears fruit in gentleness of spirit.

Two such women are held before us today as examples of this faith in God; not only for pious women and wives, but examples of faithfulness for all of us; for before the presence of God we must all be adorned with such faith.

We encounter these women in the Holy Gospel today, where we find the Blessed Virgin Mary, now pregnant with our Lord, visiting her cousin Elizabeth, who is herself pregnant with John the Baptist. We find these women in extraordinary circumstances to say the least. Both are women who should not, according to nature, be pregnant. Both are bearing in their wombs sons who were announced by the angel Gabriel. And both find themselves playing central roles in the pivotal event of all history, the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what is often overlooked in all of this is the extraordinary faith exhibited by both women.

First let's take a look at Elizabeth. She is herself six months pregnant. This in itself is a miracle in that according to St. Luke she was barren and well advanced in years. Now it is to Zacharias, her husband, that the angel Gabriel spoke, both announcing that the child would be conceived, and what role the child would play in the salvation of the world. Even though Zacharias is struck mute because of his unbelief, we can reasonably assume that he communicated the substance of this exchange with his wife, especially once she has found herself unexpectedly and miraculous pregnant. The scriptures support this assumption in that Elizabeth correctly argues that the child should be named John, the name given by the angel. The point here is that Elizabeth believes the word of God given through His angel. She does not just believe that she is pregnant, which is evident and proven in her own body, but also believes that the child in her womb will be the prophet who will go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah... to make a people prepared for the Lord.” Here we see extraordinary faith. She has heard the Word of God, a message given to her husband which defies human reason, and she believes it.

And we see further evidence of this faith in the Gospel lesson today. For when she hears the greeting of Mary, the unborn prophet leaps in her womb and she herself is filled with the Holy Spirit, and cries out: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Do you hear

the inspired faith in these words? For she confesses that she has believed the promises of God, not only personally to her, but to the whole world, that He would send His Son to redeem them. And she recognizes by the power of the Holy Spirit, that He is being borne in the womb of her relative, Mary. And again Elizabeth speaks in faith as she blesses Mary and says: "Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." Here we see true faith, faith which refuses to be bound by human reason, but which clings instead to the Word of God.

We see this same faith in Mary, the Mother of our Lord. Mary's too was a faith over and against reason. For if Elizabeth's pregnancy was extraordinary in that she had been barren, Mary's was even more so, for she was a virgin and had never been with a man. And yet when the angel Gabriel comes to her at the Annunciation, and explains that she will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and will give birth to the Savior, she answers: "Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And again, today, we hear that same faith confessed by Mary when hearing the prophetic words spoken by Elizabeth, words promising that the Word of the Lord she had heard from the angel would be fulfilled. And she responds with the words of what we now call the Magnificat, a beautiful confession of faith in God the Father and in the salvation His Son, whom she was carrying in her womb, would procure. And note how she speaks of this all in the past tense, as if it had already been accomplished. So certain is her faith! This is faith that doesn't make sense. It doesn't depend on human reason, nor does it allow reason to spoil it. It trusts humbly and simply on the Word of God it has received.

We do not find ourselves in circumstances so strange and extraordinary as those surrounding Mary and Elizabeth at the Visitation. But we are challenged with some of the same obstacles they faced in regard to faith. Namely, the challenges posed by human reason. For we too have received the Word of God, not from an angel, but proclaimed to us now from the Holy Scriptures by God's human messengers. And we encounter there things that offend our reason. Why even this story we have heard today is difficult to believe. A virgin is made pregnant by God and then visits her cousin who is also miraculously pregnant. An unborn child in the womb of one recognizes the presence of an unborn child, who is also the Son of God, in the womb of the other, and leaps for joy. His mother is suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and prophecies concerning the other mother and child. And the virgin mother responds with a poetic confession of faith! If this were a story line in a movie, we would think it preposterous! But God tells us it not just a story, or a pious tale, but that it is true. That is hard to believe.

And so we find people all around us refusing to believe it. And I don't mean the heathen only, but entire church bodies, entire denominations have now refused to believe it, categorizing these Biblical accounts as pious myths created by the early Church to promote the man Jesus to the position of deity. And not only do they deny the miraculous birth of John the Baptist and the Virgin Birth of Jesus, but also His miracles, His resurrection, His ascension, and even most of the words He spoke.

Even among those Christians who claim to believe that the Bible is inspired and is the Word of God there is often a refusal to believe the mysteries of the faith - not so much the historic events and historic miracles, but the mysteries that pertain to our own day.

Many would question what has happened here today, asking how it is possible for a baby, like little Oliver, to have faith and be saved by baptism? And yet this is what the Scriptures clearly

teach. Others question how a pastor, a mere man, can forgive my sins? And still others refuse to believe that bread and wine are made the actual body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. By their very nature such things are mysterious. But does that mean that people therefore have a right to reject them when God has, in such clear language, said that they are what He says and that they bestow His grace?

About now, we might be tempted to pat ourselves on the back, and say, “thank you God for not making us like them.” But if we are honest with ourselves, we will see that in some ways we are like them. We claim to hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, and to believe God’s Word both about the past and the present mysteries. And yet when we find something in Scripture that doesn’t make sense we too can be quick to dismiss it from mind, or to refuse to believe it. A common one among even the most pious Lutherans is refusing to believe that God will send what seem to be good people to hell, just because they haven’t heard about or believed in Jesus. It doesn’t make sense to us, and therefore we are tempted to reject this aspect of God’s judgment. But the Word of God says it is so. Another is when people refuse to believe that good can come from seemingly evil things, such as sickness or death. And we doubt God and question “How can a good God let this happen.” It flies in the face of our human reason. God says that all things work to the good of those who love Him. And this challenges our human reason and senses.

What we fail to remember at such times is that we are but mere creatures, with creaturely limitations. Our minds cannot comprehend the mind or the will or even the actions of God, apart from what He has Himself told us through the Word. As He said through the prophet Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways.” And so we must repent of our prideful reasoning and unbelief and confess instead with St. Paul: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” This is the stance of faith.

And such faith is blessed, as was the faith of the Virgin Mary and of Elizabeth. For when we receive God’s Word believing, we receive the grace He has promised to send through it. For as St. Paul writes: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” Such faith grabs hold of and clings to the blessings of life and salvation in Christ. It not only believes the historical facts of the Scriptures, but believes the Word of God pronounced in, and giving new life through, Holy Baptism, and receives that life. It believes the Word of absolution spoken by the pastor who stands in the place of, and speaks for Christ, and receives the forgiveness given. It hears and believes the Words of Christ in the Supper: “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” and feasts on the life and salvation given thereby.

These things defy reason, but they are the gifts and promises of God to us today, along with His Holy Word, which gives us knowledge and life in Christ. And believing them, believing the Word God has spoken to us, we are truly blessed, just like Elizabeth and Mary, and we join our voices to theirs in confession of all that God has done for us and say: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior... For He that is mighty hath done to me great things, and holy is His name.” May our Lord continue to keep us from unbelief and grant us such faith. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧