

Living Nativity: Leaping In The Womb
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 139:13-18; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 1:39-56

Our final Scripture reading is from Luke 1:39-56. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" And Mary said: "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. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are 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 away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.”

Everything we experience is processed through our five senses – touch, taste, hearing, vision, and smell. Our lives revolve around those five simple things. Not everyone has all five, sometimes one or more of them are compromised, but that’s how we experience life. A lot of experiences that are really good for a couple of those senses don’t work for the others. I think many people would be fine with fish if it weren’t for the smell, right? It’s no wonder when they introduced Smell-O-Vision back in the ‘50s, it didn’t work. Now movie theaters have seats that move during the movie, apparently trying to get us beyond just loud sound effects and amazing visuals. Most of us would be happy if movie theaters would work on taste and sell better food at the concession stand! Instead, they just pump the smell of butter popcorn into the theater.

But what if there were more than five senses? A lot of cultures throughout history have believed in some sort of sixth sense, that some people are inherently just more aware of the rest of us. Sometimes, they think of it as a supernatural phenomenon. And we’re fascinated by the idea that some people just instinctively know more about reality. Most of us believe in a reality beyond what we can see and touch; Christianity tells us the shape and form of that reality beyond our five senses.

Yet Christianity and Judaism are among the few religions to actively discourage any intentional meddling with the spiritual realm, with attempting to tell the future or divination or sorcery strictly forbidden. God may speak and tell the future to a prophet, and the prophet may seek God out, but a prophet may not speak on his or her own. God wants us to turn to Him alone for everything; He wants us to be aware of the unseen world, but not to be overly concerned with it. If He did, He would have given us the ability to perceive beyond what we have now.

But sometimes, God does in fact speak to us in ways far beyond our comprehension. God speaks through dreams and visions; at times, He reveals to His people the realities of the spiritual realm, such as the angels appearing to Mary and the shepherds. And today's passage is one of those situations where God works in an extraordinary way that reveals just how amazing God is when we stop for a moment and truly contemplate the situation. It's part of that living nativity that's the root of what we're studying this month – these stories are stranger and more exciting and wild than we've ever really thought possible.

So as we come into today's passage, Mary has been told by an angel that she is to bear a child, Jesus, the Savior. He explains what will happen, that she will remain a virgin yet conceive Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, and she says, "I am the servant of the Lord – may it be to me according to what you have said." She hurries off to the hill country shortly after this – our first thought is that perhaps she wants to protect this little one she's carrying. Given the strict laws against adultery, it was possible for Mary to be stoned to death for being pregnant while engaged. But it's unlikely, seeing that she returns home fully showing her pregnancy.

On the other hand, the angel has told her that Elizabeth was going to bear a child in her old age, despite having been thought barren. Miracle upon miracle is taking place, and Mary wants to go see her dear friend. Mary wants to see the one person who will understand and believe, because she's experienced her own miracle. Now the angel's appearance to Mary is already extraordinary, right? Miraculous, amazing, confounding, beyond our expectations. But that's not what we're going to study today. We'll get to angels in a couple weeks.

But what is so stunning is what happens when Mary arrives. She greets Elizabeth, probably calling in the doorway as she enters Elizabeth and Zechariah's home. Suddenly, John the Baptist, still an infant in the womb, jumps for joy. Elizabeth is overwhelmed, and suddenly the Holy Spirit is working, and she is speaking blessings over Mary and her baby to come, that has already been conceived. Both Elizabeth and John know that Jesus is here, that Mary carries Him, that she is the mother of the Messiah.

Nothing we know says that Mary wrote ahead – all of this is revealed to Elizabeth by the Holy Spirit. And Mary responds with what has become known as the Magnificat – a song of thanksgiving and praise for all God has done throughout the centuries, acknowledging that she will be called blessed for all generations, not because of her worthiness but God's grace and goodness.

Now there are plenty of great things to talk about here – Elizabeth becoming a prophetess when Mary arrives, Mary breaking out into a new Psalm – but what I want to focus on is the truly amazing thing. Here is the yet unborn John the Baptist in his mother's womb. He has no way to see anything outside, can hear but has no means to associate the sound with anything else, taste and smell are still not ready for prime-time...and yet, well before his birth, at least a month or more before, he is aware of the presence of Jesus. And in that presence, the presence of the One he will serve all his life, the One he will herald and proclaim, John leaps for joy. Now as most of us know, babies move and kick in the womb all the time. But Elizabeth knows this is different, and immediately she is given insight into Mary as the mother of Jesus the Messiah.

How does John know without seeing or hearing? How does John instinctively know that Mary carries the Savior of the world? We might think it is some sort of sixth sense, and it is, but only understood properly. That revelation is not through any special ESP or telepathy or power. Still a month or two from being born, John receives the revelation of Jesus' presence by the Holy Spirit. Well before anyone gets their first look at John, the Spirit has shown him the truth of his cousin Jesus – who at this point isn't even showing yet! The person in the world to know the Savior is here besides Mary and perhaps Joseph is a pre-born child who jostles his mom so fiercely that she can't help but know something amazing has occurred. The Spirit lets him know.

In this awesome moment, a few thoughts pop into my mind. The first is not a direct teaching from the passage, but one that needs to be said. It's this: *the events of Scripture teach us to respect and protect life from its earliest stages*. At this point, Elizabeth is probably in her third trimester, probably about seven months along. But Jesus? Jesus is probably a month in the womb, four to five weeks. He wouldn't yet show up on a modern ultrasound. And yet John is leaping for joy at the presence of Jesus. Tiniest of tiny embryos, Jesus is there, living and even at that moment acknowledged as the Lord, the Savior, come to rescue us.

Judaism stood out from all the other religions in the ancient Near East because of its culture of life. The worship of the local gods Baal and Molech involved child sacrifice. The Romans would leave unwanted children out to die from the elements. But as far back as the story of Abraham and Isaac, God made certain His people knew that He is the God of life, not death, and that the most vulnerable among us should be protected. In other cultures, children were property, not persons; in Judaism, children were called a blessing from the Lord. When Christ came and believers put their faith into action, they actually rescued Roman children off the streets, babies that had been left. Christians protected them and raised them. What other cultures despised as an unnecessary burden, Christians saw as a godsend.

Our culture has abandoned its protection of the pre-born; yet we as Christians cannot. While we may or may not be able to change laws regarding abortion, we can change hearts, one at a time. As believers who know that God creates life in the womb, that He knits us together Himself and we belong to Him at conception, our task is to live out those convictions with love and compassion.

We come alongside those struggling with difficult or unplanned pregnancies –Mary fits both of those categories, doesn't she? We come with grace for them, and we come giving out of our blessings so that they can choose life for their children. And for those who have been deceived by the lies our culture has been telling about when life begins, who didn't do the right thing, we come with love and grace as well, helping them heal the hurts of their past through the forgiveness of Jesus, and then helping them continue in a relationship with Him.

While this passage shows us the truth of life in the womb, that's ultimately not the core of our passage. There are two thoughts I want us to consider. *The first is, we are so loved by Jesus. You are so loved by Jesus*. I have heard a lot of preachers and teachers talk about how amazing it was that Jesus came as an infant, having to be swaddled, nursed, changed, going through all the benchmarks of childhood, humbling himself that way. Fully human as well as fully God, His human development had to continue through all the stages we do.

But I had never really thought about Jesus' life before birth. But think about this – 9 months before He was born into this world, Jesus came into this world. The fullness of His divine person was always there. The creator of a hundred billion galaxies and planets and stars, the infinite maker of worlds who could measure the distance between stars, is not just baby small...He's infinitesimally small. He's in the splitting cells as they start to form the tiniest blood vessels and nerves and organs. He's there before the brain is fully developed and the heart starts to beat. He humbles Himself as our servant in His adulthood; He's humbled coming as an infant; but even more, He's humbled to become, to be the infinite God, second person of the Trinity, contained in the tiniest form almost imaginable.

But as we know, that's just like God. As Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 1:27-28, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things -- and the things that are not -- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

It might seem foolish for the Father to entrust His Son to us humans, as weak and frail and prone to sin as we are. It might seem absurd that Jesus became the weakest thing possible in an embryo, and yet from their not only saved us from our sins but now reigns over all things as Savior of the world. God proves His power and might through working through the things that the world despises, that the world counts for nothing, and makes them strong.

The proof of this is what Paul says before all that. He says, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth." The people of the early church were just like us. It is people just like us that God calls His children, that He makes His own through His Son Jesus, that He gives eternal life. No matter who you are, your life situation, what you've been through, what you've done, what your sins, Jesus loves you. And He showed it by coming and living in Mary's womb for nine months, then living out a genuine, perfect human life with all its troubles so that we could be healed and made whole and brought into the presence of the Father.

Sometimes we're called to do really hard things. We're to love our neighbors and even love our enemies. We're to help here and there as ambassadors of Christ. We're to give when it's hard and care when it seems impossible. But all of that is premised on this core foundation: Jesus loves you. He came to rescue you. He didn't say, "Be a good person so you deserve rescue."

No, He said, "I will live with you, among you, as one of you, so that I can rescue you, so that I can then transform you through the Holy Spirit into people who are ready to do the good works prepared for you to do." We will do tough things, things far greater than we think we could do, because Jesus loves us and is shaping us, the weary and broken, into His people that will show the world His love.

Now the last point today, the point that I think deserves our final moments of contemplation, is this: *Do we seek out the presence of Jesus? Do we rejoice in His presence? And do we look around for those who are aware of His presence too?*

John was supernaturally aware of Jesus' presence by the power of the Holy Spirit. John rejoiced when he was in proximity to Jesus. He did this his whole life. In John 1:29, John's already doing his ministry of preparing the way, of baptizing the people for lives of repentance, readying them for Messiah to come, and when he sees Jesus, he immediately says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" He loves the presence of the Lord.

I love the stories too of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, two sisters and a brother who weren't apostles or disciples, who as far as we know didn't go on any journeys with Jesus. They just loved spending time with Jesus. They opened their home to Him. They liked being around Him. We might even remember the story where Martha gets on Mary's case because she wants to be in His presence so much, she sits at His feet and listens to His teaching when Martha thinks she should be doing the quote-unquote "women's work" and preparing for their guests. And Jesus gently rebukes Martha because Mary has chosen to do what is best – to be near Him.

Do we seek to be in the presence of Jesus? We might think that's not really where we belong. You might remember the words of the apostle Peter when Jesus called Him to be a disciple – "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." And despite that, Jesus told Him to come with Him, to start fishing for souls for the Kingdom of God rather than mere fish. Certainly by any reasonable standard, Matthew the tax collector had no business being in the presence of Jesus – a traitor to his people getting rich off of fleecing the poor. And yet Jesus called him to learn from Him, and Matthew stood beside Him.

You might think, "Well, how can we do that now, if Jesus is not physically present? How do I get in the presence of Jesus?" On a personal, intimate level, you can find the presence of Jesus when you're reading Scripture or devotional material that does a good job of explaining His Word. You can pray to Him, serve in His name, meditate on His goodness, fast to become aware of His nearness. These things don't make Jesus appear, but they prepare you to encounter Him. Remember too that the Holy Spirit lives inside believers; God is present with you at all times. The spiritual disciplines makes us more aware of Jesus being present with us.

And Jesus tells us simply in Matthew 18:20 – "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." I believe in personally seeking out the Lord, but we are made to be a community seeking out the presence of God, who promises to be with us when we gather in His name. When I think of a worship service, a Bible study, a fellowship time with companions in the faith, I think how wonderful it is to experience the presence of Jesus with us.

I encourage each of us to develop friendships with other believers, especially believers who seek the presence of God and have the spiritual sense from the Holy Spirit to know He is near. Some of us have that awareness more than others. Seek those relationships out. Because we need more of those people in our lives to guide us and mentor us so that we too become trained to recognize where God is leading and when He is steering us away. We value our friendships out in the world with all people, but we should treasure our relationships with people who know and understand and leap for joy in the presence of our Savior. I pray that all of us here today might become those people who are sensitive to the Spirit and aware of God's move among us, who have that spiritual proximity alarm when Jesus is present and when He's absent, who like John the Baptist make us aware and joyful that God has come near.