



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone*

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## “Blessings Behind the Scenes”

**Luke 1:39-45**

### Christmas Joy Offering

How many Christmases have you had? Some of you have had a LOT of Christmases! It reminds me of the story about the young couple walking in the park. The wife was visibly pregnant, and they came upon a woman with her kids out in the sunshine. One child was in the stroller, crying. Another was tugging at her arm, begging for money for ice cream from the nearby vendor. Another was racing around like an airplane, complete with sound effects. Still another was fighting with her sister in a most unladylike way. The pregnant mom looked at her husband and said, “Hon, I know we’ve been looking forward to the miracle of birth, but let’s not have too many miracles, OK?”

Birth is a miracle; I know a number of young fathers, especially, who have become willing to believe there is a God, as they witnessed the birth of their first child. And a new baby sure does get a lot of attention—for many good reasons. The second child may be nice, too. But if the babies keep coming, we can forgive the many-times-over mother if she doesn’t find the miracle of birth quite so wonderful. Susannah Wesley, the mother of John and Charles, bore 19 children. Now, there’s a strong mother!

Have we found our many Christmases are kind of like having a lot of kids—“Oh, geez, here’s another one”? How do we get the wonder back, the sense of awe of God at work, and miracles on every page? And would you want your sense of wonder renewed?

Keep these questions in mind as we read once again one of the Advent stories about God preparing the world for the birth of the Messiah, the Christ, our Lord. Open your Bibles with me to Luke, chapter 1, and find verse 39. This is the account of young Mary visiting her old cousin Elizabeth in another part of the country. Mary has just had an electrifying visit from an angel telling her she will soon be carrying the Son of God. Part of what that angel said to her included the news that old Liz was pregnant—yes, the old woman who had tried to have children for many years with her husband, the priest Zechariah. To be unable to have children was a disgrace and a shame, and Liz had felt that acutely. Elizabeth, pregnant? *No way!* Mary thought. But the angel told her this, apparently, to help Mary believe that what seemed impossible and done-with for people, was perfectly possible for God. The impossible was already true for Cousin Liz, and soon enough it would be true for Mary, as well.

Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

There are many layers in this text in Luke’s account. Mary runs to Zachariah and Liz’s home. She has to check out what the angel has told her.

We learned earlier in Luke’s Chapter One that Elizabeth had been childless all her married life. That was a shame and disgrace; women were supposed to provide offspring for the family. So Liz is celebrating how God has taken away her sterile shame. But the text in verse 24 says she hid her pregnancy for five months. I don’t think that would be the usual course of things; she apparently was so happy! Was she perhaps also afraid that at her age, she might lose the child? Then where would she be??

Mary arrives, and the women—one young, one old--embrace, and both start telling their stories at once. Then Elizabeth, who has priority because of her age, gets the whole thing out. But then when Mary gets to her story, Liz has a thunderclap of insight. When Mary had first entered her home and said “Hello, dear Cousin,” Liz’s baby kicked—hard. Now Liz knows why: her baby was responding to Mary’s arrival. The one whose call was to prepare the way was already prophesying that Mary’s future baby would be the one Israel had been waiting for—the Messiah. So now Elizabeth cries out—I get it! And in a spontaneous poetic structure, she blurts out what God is revealing to her—not neatly composed, but straight out, without filtering.

“Blessed are you among women, Mary, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Some of you will recognize these words are a standard part of the Roman Catholic liturgy, and they are taken word-for-word from this chapter of Luke, in most translations. Elizabeth goes on to point out that it’s not only because Mary will be the Christ-carrier that she is to be honored; it’s that she believed what God told her through His messenger. It’s really Mary’s willingness to trust God, it’s Mary’s faith that Liz lifts up.

Now it’s Mary’s turn to be in awe. Everything she had heard from the angel about Elizabeth is true. Then that means . . . everything the angel said about her becoming pregnant herself, would be true, too. And Mary responds with her own praise of God.

When she returns home, I’m sure Mary can hardly contain herself. But then, did she hide her pregnancy, too? Remember, she’s only engaged to Joseph. But in that culture, “engagement”, or “betrothal”, meant that the marriage contract had already been settled by the two clans—Joseph’s clan and Mary’s clan. This is not “two crazy kids running off and getting married”; whole families are involved. It was already a done deal; only the ceremony remained. That’s why (in Matthew’s account) it can be said that Joseph was thinking of divorcing her quietly, to minimize Mary’s shame at being pregnant (most people would assume) by another man. *Hello!* You can’t have a divorce without a marriage! So Joe and Mary’s “betrothal” was more like what we mean by “marriage”; it was a public commitment, once the news of the “bans” had been spread around. Maybe Mary kept her pregnancy quiet, too, for her own reasons.

Remember, these are “first babies” for both these gals; they have much between them that that they share, and much that makes them different. In this meeting we just read about, both have heard God’s voice in each other’s voices. Both are in awe of what is happening. Each child, and each pregnancy, is a wonder.

Now, let’s pull back for a moment. This scene took place about 30 years before John or Jesus began their public ministries. There’s some 30 years of near-silence concerning these boys as they become men. A lot of time passes before anything pops up.

Then, too, both mothers also met behind the scenes, out of public view. Elizabeth is the wife of a priest; she has some public exposure, and she is proudest of her pregnancy because it took away her painful embarrassment of not providing an heir for her husband. The time will come—perhaps Mary’s visit is the trigger—when she will no longer hide her pregnancy. Read further in the chapter, when the child is born, and it’s a pretty public event.

But Mary will remain even further behind the scenes. She’s from Nazareth, we think, which was not held in high regard by the elites in Jerusalem, down south. She really is of no account; she could pass most of her fellow Israelites, and never be noticed. Isn’t it interesting that the boy who will grow up to have a lesser role as an adult has the more public arrival, but the boy who will grow up to save Israelites from their sins will have a more obscure birth!

What I’m trying to point out is that God seems very content to work behind the scenes, and to take a long time to do important work. Since the Industrial Revolution, the Western European and North American culture has expected a huge acceleration in innovation, and a increase in expectations for immediate success. We want it when we want it; we want it “our way”. God’s not like that, which makes the distance between us and God seem even greater. I

like the way Edward Sullivan put it: "When God wants an important thing done in this world, or a wrong righted, He goes about it in a very singular way. He does not release His thunderbolts or stir up His earthquake. He simply has a tiny, helpless baby born, perhaps in an obscure home, perhaps of a very humble mother. Then He puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart, she puts it into the baby's mind and then -- God waits." (Christian Communications Laboratory)

Two women overcome by hidden glory. It's as though each is asking, "Why me?"—but in a good way. "How come *I* get to be the one who meets the mother of the Messiah?" Elizabeth asks. "How come *I* get to be the one who will give birth to the Savior of my people?" Mary asks. It reminds me so much of Psalm 8—"What is 'mere mankind', that You--God of the Universe--even notice humankind, let alone care about people?!"

What does all this say to us here, this morning? I've got some ideas, and maybe you do, too. Two women: one old, one young, but God has a plan for each. And it's a plan that requires that they play what might seem to others to be an ordinary part, behind the scenes. As for you and me, what if God called to you, and told you to do something that would change your life dramatically, though others might not notice for years and years? Would your trust in God be up to that marathon challenge?

The church is often referred to as a "mother". We are a womb, developing disciples out of sight, "behind the scenes", and then launching them into the rest of their lives to infect others with The With-God Life. Those who really come alive in this womb find their lives transformed. They look at the world differently, with God's eyes. They notice things about other people that most folks miss. They look for God at work around them, and consider themselves invited to join God in that Kingdom work.

Is that you? Blessed are any of you who trusts that God will complete what He promises, no matter how long it takes.

For what has God been preparing you? With all your life experience, your skills and gifts, what might God LOVE to do with someone like you? Have you looked at how much or how little you've been developing in the things of God as you live in this womb? How will your life, perhaps through ordinary means and behind the scenes, advance God's kingdom?

With Christmas coming this week, wouldn't this be a great time to try an act of Kingdom life? It need not be something spectacular--perhaps just a word to a relative, asking them about what they think God really desires for them. That simple, ordinary thing might turn out to be your best Christmas gift to anyone this year, helping Christ be born in them. Start looking around, with God's eyes. Listen to the conversations, with God's ears. Move gently; it's not about getting something done, it about the relationships.

Now it's time to move out of the womb, and bring the God-life to your little corner of God's world, your mission field. Go get 'em. Merry Christmas, indeed!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on December 20, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]