

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

5 And he shall be their peace.

Hebrews 10:5–10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;

6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

7 Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,

as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’ ”

8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39–45

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Christ centered pericope

Suppose you were present at the scene of today's Gospel. Who or what was this about? Mary and Elizabeth, right? In fact, given the fact that Elizabeth is doing all the talking in this pericope, we might even be inclined to say it's mostly about Elizabeth. Mary remains silent throughout this text. Now, this poses a problem. After all, Mary is the one who figures quite prominently in the Nativity story and in the story of our salvation. Elizabeth is important. She gives birth to John the Baptist. But, when you get down to it, Mary is the mother of our Lord; not Elizabeth. If anyone should be more prominent it should be Mary.

So this sort of upsets our Lutheran senses. Right? It's okay to admit it. We don't worship Mary. We don't pray to Mary as some of our wayward Roman Catholic brothers and sisters do. But then again, there is something about Elizabeth's remarks here that we just can't get around or avoid; something that sounds an awful lot like, "Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou among women and blessed

is the fruit of your womb, Jesus Christ. Pray for us sinners now and at the time of our death." "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Well there it is these exact words are right here in verse 42, being proclaimed with a loud and joyous worshipful cry by Elizabeth. You know a lot of people think we are really just a bunch of Roman Catholics in denial? I hear something similar from people who come visit us. They say, "I enjoyed the service, but it seems too Roman Catholic." I have to admit: Elizabeth's words here don't exactly help our defense, do they?

Ahh, could it be that we have things a little out of focus? First off, it's important to recognize that Elizabeth uses two different Greek words here for speaking of the blessedness of Mary. In verse 42, the Greek word for blessed (pronounced blest) is eulogāmones. This word is a passive participle, meaning that it functions sort of like a past tense passive verb. A good example would be like using the verb "eat." The passive participle would sound like this: "The hamburger was eaten." With this in mind, this word— eulogāmones —blessed—would be understood as being blessed by someone at some point beforehand. The blessing happened to Mary. She was blessed by someone else, by God, before she came into Elizabeth's presence. Her womb was blessed by God. She wasn't called blessed because she was a good or upright person. She didn't earn the right to be called the mother of our Lord because she was exemplary in every way, shape, and form. God chose her. He exalted her from her lowliness. He chose the womb of a humble little nobody; a poor young virgin from "nowhere" Galilee to be Christ's mommy.

Are you getting the sense of shift taking place in your understanding of this pronouncement of blessedness? The next words out of Elizabeth's mouth refocus us even more. "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Did you catch that? Elizabeth doesn't say, "Why is this granted to me that such a blessed, perfect, exemplary woman of God

comes to me?" Her focus is on Christ Jesus. Her joy is in the fact that she has been brought into the very presence of her Lord and God. She recognizes the womb of this humble virgin as proof that Almighty God is keeping His Word and saving His people from their sin. She recognizes the reality of Immanuel, God with us, even though that reality was but a small little fetus miraculously conceived in the womb of a lowly, nobody virgin. It should be noted too, that

Elizabeth was awakened to this reality because of the true miracle of life in her womb. The six-month old fetus, John the Baptist, heard the greeting of Mary, the dwelling place of Christ the Lord (an image of the Church on earth), and literally leaped for joy. Already in the womb, John was fulfilling

God's Word and Will by pointing others to the Messiah!

It's at this point (verse 45) that Elizabeth uses the second Greek word for blessedness to describe Mary, "makarios." This same word is used elsewhere by Christ in the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." We recognize those adjectives; those descriptions of faithful blessedness, don't we? This is exactly what Elizabeth is saying about Mary. Notice: Mary is called bless-ed here because of her faith, not because of anything special she did to earn or merit the blessing. She is called blessed because she believed God's Almighty and miraculous Word that He spoke to her concerning His fulfilling of His plan of salvation by using her virgin womb as the Almighty's sanctuary and dwelling place. Again we see the entire importance of this event being directed to and framed around Christ Jesus. Everyone and everything in this scene is centered on faith alone in God's grace alone through Christ alone.

My brothers and sisters in Christ: As we close out this Advent season now and prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I pray that in these few minutes of time you've been able to get a different perspective and understanding of Mary and Elizabeth. Two thousand years later and nothing has changed in terms of salvation. Their blessed reality is our blessed reality. The joyous proclamation of Elizabeth still rings out to us today! Like Mary, we are still blessed by God. We are still called bless-ed because of Christ Jesus! Our focus as faithful children of God is still grounded in Christ, and I don't mean in some pietistic, holy-roller kind-of-way that boasts about "keeping Christ in Christmas" all the while looking, sounding, and acting like every other fool out there fighting over gifts, budgets, decorations, and the like.

This wonderful portrait of saving faith is still our reality today. Like Mary, the Church is still called blessed because she, the Church, is still the tabernacle, the dwelling place of Christ Almighty. This is where Immanuel becomes reality every time two or three are gathered in Christ's name around His Word and Sacrament; not because of our merit or worthiness, but in spite of us and our sin; because of us and our sin and our faith in Him alone as the sole source of forgiveness, deliverance, and redemption. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the Words of eternal life." The words that are faithfully proclaimed from the mouth of the Church, the mouth of the place where Christ Jesus is at the center, still adventing with us in His lifegiving Word and Sacraments, still bringing life and joy and salvation to lowly "nobody" sinners dwelling in this fallen and sinful world. "Those who hear you hear Me." Those dead in their sin still arise and

leap for joy upon hearing Christ's lifegiving Word of the Gospel as it is faithfully proclaimed, taught, and confessed by His humble maidservant, the Church.

May God continue to bless you with those same eyes and ears of saving faith that Elizabeth and Mary so wonderfully demonstrated so that you too may be rightly focused on the sole source of your complete forgiveness and eternal salvation: Your blessedness that is ours in His cradle and cross alone always be framed at the center of this scene that we call "life," for it is this peace and blessedness of Christ, which surpasses all human understanding, that guards and keeps us unto life-everlasting with our Lord and Savior. Amen