

The Feast of the Visitation of Our Lord  
7 July, Anno Domini 2019  
St. Luke 1:39-56  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I would encourage each of you to pray the collect appointed for today regularly. It is a wonderful collect which confesses our need for God's help in not only hearing His saving word but hearing His Word rightly. We pray "grant that we may receive Your Word in humility and faith, and so be made one with Jesus Christ..." The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, it is the power of God for salvation, it created everything out of nothing and raised people from the dead. But it is not magical. It's not like fairy dust. It can be despised and refused. It can go into the ears but never penetrate to the heart. It must be heard with repentant humility and faith.

Ask Zechariah. He heard Gabriel's good news about the son he and Elizabeth had longed for but he let his flesh and his reason get in the way. Zechariah limited God by what he was able to comprehend and the weakness of his aging body. And thus Zechariah was struck mute, unable to publicly rejoice in and proclaim the Gospel. Zechariah wasn't just kept from telling people about John, but the great fact that John was the forerunner of the long-expected Messiah! It is Mary, who received the incredible news of our Lord's incarnation in humble faith (remember her response "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.") who received the high honor of not only being the mother of God, but also the first person to announce the arrival of God in the flesh.

It is not enough to simply hear the sound of the preaching in your ears. It isn't enough to simply read your Bible cover to cover. Satan and the demons know the Bible backwards and forwards. They were some of the first to call Jesus, rightly, the Son of God. But they have no salvation. You can say the words "I love you" or "I forgive you", but if they aren't believed they help no one. Just showing up on Sunday morning and sitting in the pew doesn't guarantee you a ticket to heaven. Judas heard Jesus preaching for three years (probably every day), he saw the miracles, and yet he refused everything he heard and thus took his own life in despair over his sin and now suffers eternal torment because he didn't believe that which he heard.

The Word of God is a promise. It is promise that God has laid all of your sins upon His Son, Jesus Christ. It is a promise that the Blood of Jesus has made full atonement for you. It is a promise that death no longer has any power over you. It is a promise that when the Son of God returns in His glory, the suffering of His children will be brought to an eternal end. It is a promise that the waters of Holy Baptism bear with them the Holy Spirit and bestow upon you the inheritance of God's gracious kingdom. It is a promise that veiled under the bread and wine of Holy Communion you receive the very Body and Blood of your Savior, Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of all your sins.

But promises must be believed in order to be beneficial. And this is not the kind of faith that says, "Yea, I believe Jesus said those things." That is what is sometimes called dead faith or historical faith. It's no different than believing that Napoleon actually existed. Again, the demons believe in Jesus that way. But that kind of belief does not receive the promises of God as "for me". That kind of faith treats Jesus as a wise man who had some good moral lessons to teach.

True faith, the kind of faith which Elizabeth praised after hearing Mary's greeting, saying "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" knows that God is no liar and that all His promises, no matter how unreasonable they seem, will be fulfilled. Though Gabriel's message that Mary would bear in her womb the very Son of the Most High God was beyond the sphere of human comprehension - that God should take on human flesh, that God should grow inside the womb of his earthly, sinful mother and be born as all men are born, that He should nurse and toddle and suffer hunger and pain and sorrow, that He who is life should suffer death - though all of these things seem quite impossible, by the grace of God, Mary submitted to this news, trusting that God is true and that her son was the promised Messiah of old who would bear her sins and the sins of the whole world and restore man to God. Rightly, Mary cast aside reason and philosophical categories and logical boxes, and humbly submitted herself to the will and work of God.

That is the very nature of saving faith. Such faith requires true humility because the very nature of the promises of God presume that we are completely incapable of saving ourselves, that there is nothing good in our flesh. This is why the Gospel is difficult and not well-received by the world. It doesn't exalt man or praise his goodness or intellect. It doesn't simply tell him what his itching ears want to hear. It tells him the truth about himself. It tells him the truth about God as a God of mercy and forgiveness, without which we can't live.

Truthfully, even the depth of our own sin must be believed on the basis of what God declares in Holy Scripture because we can't know it and we certainly don't want to believe it. If we didn't have the Holy Ten Commandments, it would be easy to imagine ourselves to be good people. But in the perfect mirror of God's Law it is undeniably clear that we are not holy or righteous or good. We can see that even the very best of our works don't come anywhere close to measuring up to the Law's strict and absolute demands. What's more, the Law exposes those who work feverishly to appear holy and do super "holy" things. They are frauds who, though fooling the world, invite the wrath of God because they trust in themselves and would not have Him as their God.

Mary speaks beautifully of this in the Magnificat, proclaiming that God "has looked upon the humble estate of his servant. [God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the might from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." The good news of the incarnation is only good news to those who in humble faith confess that they are lost sinners and seek God according to His mercy. To the proud and those who think they are strong, who think that sin and Satan are not threats to them, a Savior is foolish and insulting idea and the Gospel is silly. But to the humble Marys who have tasted the bitterness of their sin, who struggle against the weakness of their own flesh, those who are under no delusion about the bottomless pit of their sin and do not attempt to hide behind a cheap veneer of works and intentions, the Gospel is their greatest and only source of comfort and joy because there, God grants full and free deliverance. There, God gives hope to the hopeless because there, God promises in Christ the thing that none of us could ever hope to obtain on our own - freedom from the guilt of our sin.

And this promise is for you, for each and everyone of you who hear this promise in true, humble, repentant faith. God wants you to be comforted and strengthened by the Gospel. He wants to turn your hearts away from sin and fear and toward one another in love and humility. He wants you to rest in the salvation which He has prepared for you in Jesus and not look anywhere else. He wants you to drink deeply of His Word so that you might know the truth and by the truth be set free.

But apart from such faith this word is of no help to you. If you don't take up the Word daily to hear and learn it, if you refuse to gather with the saints where God speaks to His people, if you are busy talking with your neighbor during the Divine Service and the reading and preaching of God's Word, if your heart is cold or combative toward the Word and you approach it with the intent of making it

submit to your own will and reason, then beware. This Word will not only be of no benefit to you but on the Last Day it will stand in judgment over you.

Let it not be so among us. Let us give our full attention to the saving Word of God, gladly hearing and learning it. Let us pray that God would grant us His Holy Spirit so that we may receive His promises in true faith, repenting of our sins and trusting alone in Christ for our salvation. Let us be counted among the lowly, the poor, and the hungry and not those who imagine themselves to be strong and full on ourselves. Let us treasure the Word which God has graciously spoken and hold it fast as our highest and only good. Let us sing with Mary and Elizabeth and all the saints because this day our Lord has graciously visited us again with His full and free forgiveness.

In the Name of +Jesus.