

Sunday December 17, 2023
Lesson 3: A Spirit-Filled Blessing
Scripture: Luke 1:24-25, 39-45

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The first unit is titled “Transforming Spirit,” with lessons on the gospel of Luke in the story of Jesus’ birth tying into the season of Advent. Today’s lesson continues the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus as she visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is also carrying a child. The focus of today’s lesson will be to discover ways God blesses others through us.

The story we read today has two stories from the previous weeks colliding. We started this Advent season with the angel Gabriel visiting Zechariah to tell him of a child born to his family at an old age. Last week we read of the young Mary approached by the same angel to hear of how God would also work a miracle through her giving birth to the son of the most high God. Their stories collide as Elizabeth and Mary are related to one another and the story continues to unfold.

In traditional Christian liturgies, this scene is called the Visitation. There is little narrative yet is entirely of inspired speech and song, reminding us of the affective force of literary forms.¹ The event takes place in the hill country of Judah, which has the distinction of being a powerful tribe and place.

With the Visitation, there are four parts to guide the scene. In the first scene, there is a narrative introduction as Mary goes to visit Elizabeth in their home. The unborn John knows what is taking place and leaps in the womb as Mary enters, recalling the historical allusion to Rebekah in whose womb Esau and Jacob struggled, the message being in both cases, “The elder shall serve the younger.”² God is already at work to move the narrative with different people playing different roles.

The second unit focuses more on the little dialogue present. In the second part of the Visitation, Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit eulogizes both Mary and her child.³ She blesses Mary on two grounds: she has been chosen to be the mother of the Lord, and she has believed the word of God.⁴ The scene will be foreshadowing as later on we will see John humble himself before Jesus and give him praise at a scene of baptism.

The third and fourth units of the Visitation are not in today’s lesson and will be addressed next week. Yet we are given a good backdrop of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary as both women sing the praise of the Lord and encourage one another on their prospective calling by the Lord. Both radiate the joy of the Holy Spirit as they encourage and counsel each other.

¹ Craddock, Fred B. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 29. See Genesis 25: 21-23 for reference.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Application

Do you have a favorite relative you run to when you have big news to share? While some people may not come from family situations where they live near loved ones, others do usually have some kind of network where there is someone who is like family to whom they can turn to in both the ordinary and extraordinary times. I know as I read of this story, I thought of an older cousin who I run to with both good, bad, and somewhere in-between news. They are always there and have been a constant presence unto me, watching me struggle, grow, and bloom into who I am today. It is a relationship where I have felt and seen the Holy Spirit move and encourage us to be who God made us to be.

The Holy Spirit is the other primary actor in this narrative as Mary is encouraged to make her way to visit this cousin by the Spirit tugging at her heart. Throughout the narrative, both with Elizabeth alone and then with Mary and Elizabeth together, we hear of the Holy Spirit filling them with the words and encouragement they give to one another. There is nothing ambitious or self-seeking in their relationship as the conversation speaks of the goodness of what God is doing and what God will do in their lives.

As I read this narrative, I thought of how the Holy Spirit works through our close relationships and through the words we share with one another. While every now and then we definitely need a touch of tough love, this text speaks of how the Holy Spirit works with joy in the lives of others, encouraging them to live into the calling God had placed into their lives in the particular season they found themselves in. There is mutuality and there is goodness.

I think the best work of the Holy Spirit sometimes comes in how we discover the ways God blesses others through us. In any relationship, whether it is of a platonic or an amorous nature, should include an element of encouraging others and our very presence making those individuals feel safe and supported. There should be some type of way in which people know how important they are as human beings and how God has claimed them as God's own.

How do you know if you bless others with your presence? It's a fair question and that is up to you to decide. The odds are someone will always dislike us or will not care for something we did or said. We may even have people who label us as "mortal enemies," as they go on their way to discredit or talk about us.

Yet I think the way we can ask if our presence blesses other is to think about how the healthy people we know and how they respond to us either in word or deed. Or better yet, we choose kindness and goodness over other behaviors which do not show our best selves. We choose to be the bigger person, trusting God will sort everything else.

Recently, I was trying to decide if I wanted to say something a bit harsh to someone else. The Spirit kept nudging me not to say it, yet my soul really wanted something to be said. So, I reached out to a colleague who is like a brother who never talks negatively about anyone. They processed the whole thing with me and then I felt the Spirit confirm it; if you cannot say anything nice, do not say anything at all. Instead, focus on what you can control and be the person of honor and love God created you to be.

I realized what drove me to reach out to this individual is how I have seen their presence bless others, as well as mine. I am not even sure of if they are aware of their impact and yet I have seen God use them to bless others in so many ways. God can even use us when we are unaware to bless those around us and enrich our own souls.

Today's account reminds us we are never too old or too young to be a blessing to others. My prayer for the church today is we may realize this fact and seek in our individual journeys to

encourage others. If we are older, encourage younger ones to keep growing and showing up. They may not be perfect yet God is at work when we affirm them. If we are younger, let us give thanks to our elders and also tell them of how much they bless us with their service and support. May we see how the Holy Spirit is at work in all of our lives and how much we are called to bless others.

Who is someone who radiates God's Spirit in their life and how they treat others? How have you seen the Holy Spirit nudge you to encourage or affirm someone? Why do you think the Holy Spirit wants us to be encouraging and loving? Who are the people who you feel blessed by? Who do you think you bless in your daily life?

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