

Our Gospel reading is appropriate as we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Our Gospel reading describes something that happened not long before Jesus was born. Mary, Jesus's mother, visited her relative, Elizabeth. Both Mary and Elizabeth were pregnant with very special babies. Mary had been visited by the angel Gabriel who told her that she would conceive and bear a son. She was to name him Jesus because he would be the Savior.

Elizabeth's pregnancy was also unusual. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were old and had not been given any children. Zechariah had also been visited by Gabriel who told him that he and his wife would conceive in their old age. The child was to be named John. Zechariah and Elizabeth did conceive about six months before Gabriel went to Mary.

So in our reading today Mary was pregnant with Jesus and Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist. Luke says that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She is filled with joy, and she speaks several blessings. She blesses Mary: "**Blessed are you among women.**" She blesses Jesus: "**Blessed is the fruit of Mary's womb.**" She blesses herself. She rhetorically asks: "**Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?**" Her thoughts turn to her son. She comments on how her baby leaped for joy at Mary's greeting.

Finally, Elizabeth blesses Mary for her faith. Perhaps Elizabeth's thoughts turned to what it might have been like when Mary heard Gabriel's message. Elizabeth said, "**Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.**" Not every woman would believe that she could conceive while remaining a virgin simply because the Lord said so. Mary did. She said to God: "**Let it be done to me according to your Word.**"

Elizabeth moves from one blessing to the next. Everyone is blessed. All are exceedingly happy. What I'd like to consider today is why they are so happy. I'd also like to pay attention to our own happiness. Happiness is important to us. We all would like to be happy. So, in fact, before we consider what makes these women happy, I think it would be beneficial first to consider what makes us happy. We can then be on the lookout for what might be different with these women.

There are a lot of things that can make us happy. Hunger being satisfied with food makes us happy; thirst, with drink. We have many desires and needs. We want and need affection, comfort, entertainment. We like to be right. We like to be the best. We like making progress. Getting richer is better than getting poorer. Getting stronger is better than getting weaker. There are so many ways to be happy, and we like them all. The more, the better; the more, the happier.

Now let's consider these women's happiness. What makes them happy doesn't exactly fit the pattern we've sketched out. They aren't getting stronger, richer, better. Elizabeth's life didn't get easier with her pregnancy in old age. Mary's life was thrown into turmoil to a much greater degree. Mary became pregnant when she wasn't married. Everyone would have assumed that the pregnancy was the result of fornication. Joseph, her fiancé, had no other choice but to assume that she had been unfaithful. An angel had to intervene to tell him otherwise. Mary would have had a hard time of it because most would not believe what sounds like a far-fetched story—that Mary was pregnant with the Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Consider, additionally, the several clues about Mary and Joseph's poverty and powerlessness. When they came to Bethlehem they couldn't get a room. If they had more money, they could have compelled someone to provide for them. Later, when the sacrifices were made in the Temple, the cheaper option of two pigeons was offered instead of the more expensive lamb. These clues indicate that Mary and Joseph were poor. The baby was born into poverty: "No crib for a bed" to lay down his sweet head.

If we place ourselves into Mary's shoes, we can see how she lacked things that we regard as essential for happiness. So how can she be happy? How can Elizabeth be happy for her when trouble is on every side? She even makes the audacious claim that Mary is blessed over and above all others. The only explanation is that they were focused on things that aren't often looked to for happiness. We might sum up all that they were feeling by saying: They were happy because the kingdom of God was coming upon the earth.

What is the kingdom of God, and why is it a good thing? We can't hardly talk about a kingdom without talking about the king. Something you might keep an ear open for the next couple days is how often Christmas carols will sing about Jesus being the king, or the Lord: "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." Or: "Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn king." The good news of great joy that is for all people is, as the angel declared on Christmas night, that unto us a Savior has been born who is Christ the Lord.

The work of Christ the King in his kingdom is made plain in the Gospels. Jesus did several things. He taught the Word of God that has always been calling people away from evil, away from the devil, towards that which is good and true—life giving and life protecting. Jesus taught people to believe in the only true God instead of the various false gods. Jesus acted with power, performing miracles. His many cleansings, healings, and restorations to life were a foreshadowing of the greater work he will do when he resurrects the dead.

Over and above all these things, but also at the very root of them, Jesus suffered and died. As our epistle reading mentions, he offered his body once for all. My favorite line of all the Christmas carols is the one where it says: "Nails, spear shall piece him through. The cross be borne for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the Son of Mary." The king sacrificed himself. The result is forgiveness, righteousness, and life for everyone.

So if we return to the happiness and joy of Elizabeth and Mary, we can see that it is outside of them. The kingdom of God is coming. Happiness depends on the king, not on themselves. So long as their faith in this king doesn't fail, nothing can take their happiness away. Whatever sadnesses might come, they cannot undo the march of progress the kingdom of God will make.

You can see this in both their lives. Both Elizabeth's and Mary's unborn baby boys would eventually be killed at the hands of evil men. Simeon prophesied to Mary in the temple: "A sword will pass through your heart." Mary mourned at the death of her Son, but God will turn all mourning into gladness. Jesus died, but then he rose. Then his kingdom only entered a new phase, the song swelled to an even higher pitch. Joy will grow, even if, in the meantime, we pass through the valley of the shadow of death.

This joy is available to each and every one of you. All that is needed is to be like Elizabeth and Mary: Believe in Jesus's kingdom. To believe is not some great challenge or a puzzle you have to figure out. It is only a matter of believing the testimony that is given about Jesus, and testimonies abound! Elizabeth gave her testimony in our reading. The angel gave his testimony on Christmas night. The apostles, evangelists, prophets, prophetesses, deacons, and deaconesses all gave their testimony, and they all say the same thing: Jesus Christ is Lord. He does all things well. He sets all things right.

This is good news, which comes to us from the outside. It does not place any demands upon us. It does not require any preparation. Think of all those people in the Gospels whom Jesus helped. Did the blind man have to start improving himself before Jesus would give him sight? No. The blind man remained as blind as a bat. The deaf man remained as deaf as a stone, until Jesus made them otherwise. The only thing that happened to them prior to their healings was that they were given hope in Jesus the king by the good news that was told them.

The same thing is true for us today. We have problems. We might have a bad reputation. We might be poor. We might be blind, deaf, lame, demon possessed. Believe in Jesus.

And let's apply this to sin. One of the most frustrating parts about being a Christian is that we end up falling into sin, even though we really don't want to—or at least a part of us doesn't want to. What do we do with that? We almost can't help thinking that we must clean ourselves up in order to become acceptable before God. That seems right. To do otherwise can make it seem as though sin doesn't matter. We have to take our sin very seriously.

These are not altogether bad thoughts, but they can make us lose sight of the one thing that makes all the difference—the one thing that makes us happy with a happiness that no one can take away: Jesus is the king. He saves sinners. He baptizes you, you don't baptize yourself. He forgives you, you don't forgive yourself. The kingdom of God is on a roll with the preaching of the Word that Jesus is the Savior. What is asked of us is not a great burden: Stick with the king. Listen to his Word. Jesus will do everything he has promised. Jesus is going to win.

So you, like Elizabeth and Mary, may fully embrace the goodness of the kingdom of God that made them so happy that blessings were flying all over the place. The kingdom of God is the best, because Jesus is the best. No matter what is going on, no matter how disappointed you might be in yourself or in others, Jesus Christ is Lord.

["Come Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free."](#) Amen.

