

At the same time, however, it is a celebration that rejoices in the present work that Jesus is doing in our hearts, lives, and communities.

When we, as individuals and as a community of faith, focus on God's past and present saving works, we can see the possibilities for God's future saving works.

It sets aside the fear that we might have for how our world is going and places in our line of sight a bright picture of what is to come: the Kingdom of God in its fullness. And what is to come rests securely in the arms of the one who is coming again, Jesus Christ.

Advent is a powerful time for us because, when we remember the past, our fears are cast aside and replaced with hope, and as the Apostle Paul reminds us, hope from God does not disappoint us.

Works Cited

Green, Joel B. The Gospel of Luke. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997.

HOME AGAIN

LUKE 1:39-56

Catching Up on the Story

In the very early stages of this narrative, Luke has been weaving together two separate yet connected storylines.

The first storyline is that of the elderly couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah. They are from Aaron's priestly line and are unable to bear children. While working in the Temple, one day, Zechariah gets a visit from an angel proclaiming that the couple will soon give birth to a son. The son's name will be John, and he will not be ordinary. He will be the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah fails to believe and so loses his ability to speak until the baby is born.

The second storyline is that of Mary, a young woman who is engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Mary, who is a virgin, is also visited by an angel telling her that she will become pregnant, too. Only this pregnancy will not come about in the normal way, but it will be a blessing from God. Again, the boy she will bear, Jesus, will be no normal son; he will be called "Son of the Most High" and sit on his ancestor David's throne (1:32-33). Mary receives the news with more faith than Zechariah, yielding herself as a servant of God.

Of course, Mary and Elizabeth are related, and the angel informs Mary that Elizabeth is also pregnant. These two initially separate storylines are now about to come together.

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands.

⁴⁰ She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³ Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

⁴⁶ Mary said,
 “With all my heart I glorify the Lord!
⁴⁷ In the depths of who I am
 I rejoice in God my savior.
⁴⁸ He has looked with favor
 on the low status of his servant.
 Look! From now on, everyone
 will consider me highly favored
⁴⁹ because the mighty one
 has done great things for me.
 Holy is his name.
⁵⁰ He shows mercy to everyone,
 from one generation to the next,
 who honors him as God.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm.
 He has scattered those with arrogant
 thoughts and proud inclinations.
⁵² He has pulled the powerful
 down from their thrones
 and lifted up the lowly.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry
 with good things
 and sent the rich away empty-handed.
⁵⁴ He has come to the aid
 of his servant Israel,
 remembering his mercy,
⁵⁵ just as he promised to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to Abraham’s
 descendants forever.”
⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then
 returned to her home (CEB)

The Journey and Greeting: 1:39-45

Not long after Mary receives the news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, she sets out to visit her. In those days, young women did not travel once they had been engaged to be married. An engaged woman would normally remain secluded in her home until she entered the bridal chamber. She certainly would not have left unaccompanied on what was possibly a seventy-mile trip (Green, 94-95).

We are not given a specific reason for Mary’s trip; the angel did not command her to go. Nevertheless, her journey to visit

6. In Advent, we not only celebrate Jesus’ birth, but we expectantly wait for Jesus’ coming again. How does remembering what God has done in the past (like Jesus’ birth) help us view and understand current events in our life and give us hope for future events?
7. As a group, try to compose a poem or song that outlines all that God has done for you in the past. Keep it as a reminder that as God has worked in the past, God will work in the future.

So What?

Advent should be a powerful time for us because it reminds us of how God has acted on our behalf in the past and the effects those acts have on our present and future.

Mary sings the song because she remembers all that God has done, in covenant loyalty, for her and her people.

Her remembering helps her realize what God is doing through her now.

Mary’s story is our story.

We are children of Abraham.

We are children of the covenant and God’s faithfulness to it.

God has shown mercy to us from generation to generation.

Mary’s song is our song, too.

We are just a few short days away from celebrating the birth of Jesus. This celebration rejoices in what God has done through Jesus’s past work.

2. Why does the yet-to-be-born John leap for joy in Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrives? What does this say about who John will be in relationship to Jesus?

3. Elizabeth offers a blessing to Mary and wonders aloud why it would be that someone so important would come to visit her. Why would Elizabeth wonder why Mary would come to visit her?

4. Mary's song begins by declaring that her soul and spirit are filled with joy. The rest of the song outlines why she is filled with joy. Make a list of all of the things that she describes in the song that God has done. What portion of those things were done for Mary, and what portion of those things were done for God's people?

5. Why would one who is miraculously pregnant with the "Son of the Most High" recount all these things that God has done in the past? What connection is there between what God is doing through Mary and what God has done in the past, as related in the song?

Elizabeth fits Luke's general journey motif. Narratively, it also helps the reader understand how these two storylines intersect and who the story's true hero is.

Or, perhaps her hasty visit was an attempt to flee some of the shame that came with being a young unmarried woman who was with child.

Mary arrives at Elizabeth's home and greets her. Upon hearing Mary's greeting, the child Elizabeth carries in her womb begins to leap for joy, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit.

We can assume that what fills Elizabeth now fills John, too. The Spirit's filling of Elizabeth and John enables them (and us now as witnesses to this event) to discern the significance of Mary and the child she carries.

As we will hear in Elizabeth's speech, there is no doubt about the hope that is about to be fulfilled. Elizabeth's Spirit-guided discernment also turns social custom on its head.

In her world, those of lesser standing, because of age and the like, travel to and visit those of greater standing. The initial greeting is offered by the lesser person, too.

For her part, Mary acts accordingly, which causes Elizabeth to wonder why she has done so. Elizabeth questions why such a good thing that the mother of her Lord would come to visit her has happened to her.

Elizabeth recognizes that due to God's graciousness toward Mary, Mary is the one who is now the greater person in the relationship.

As a general rule, Luke's gospel will constantly turn social norms and customs upside down. This instance is but one of many. Elizabeth also offers Mary a blessing.

The word used here, "blessed," is the same word that Jesus will use in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a word that is "spoken over those who are judged to possess what is necessary for a joyful life and especially over those who are the recipients of God's gift of redemption" (Green, 96). God has truly blessed Mary as she carries this child who will be the savior of the world.

Mary's Song: 1:46-56

In response to Elizabeth's blessing, Mary sings a song that is a declarative psalm of praise (like Psalms 8, 33, 47, 100, 135, and 136).

Mary's song uses parts of psalms, hymns, and scripture that she would have been familiar with since childhood. The song functions like the songs in a Broadway or Disney musical.

Songs in those types of productions do not usually advance the narrative, but they do help the viewer understand what has already transpired and, perhaps, offer some foreshadowing. Thus, Mary's song does not advance Luke's narrative but helps us understand the significance of the events that have already taken place.

Mary's song begins by stating that she is filled with joy on the deepest levels, in her "soul" and "spirit."

Throughout the Old Testament, joy is linked to God's future saving events. As we have already seen with John's prenatal leap of joy, the expectation is that God is about to act decisively and positively for his people.

As is normal with psalms of praise, there is a declaration of praise, and the reason for the praise is given.

Mary is filled with joy because God has favored her (and her people) despite their "lowliness."

Lowliness in this context has to do with Israel's position as an oppressed country at the hands of the Romans. Luke also uses the term in connection with "the poor" in his gospel and Acts (Green, 103).

What is clear is that Mary sees herself and her people as being oppressed, poor, and in need of God's saving hand. Now, she believes God's hand is going to act in a mighty way to reverse the situation.

Beginning in verse 48, Luke begins using a series of verbs (looked, done great things, shown strength, scattered, brought down, filled the hungry, sent away, lifted up) that are in the aorist tense or an undefined past tense in Greek.

In some places, this means the result of the verb's action has consequences that will continue into the future. In Mary's song and Luke's gospel, this string of verbs ties together a testimony about God's faithfulness with the current events. Additionally, these verbs link what has transpired in the past to the hope for what God will do in the future.

The subject for each of these verbs is God. God is the one doing the action. Mary is proclaiming God's faithfulness in the past. Great things have been done. He has shown mercy for those who wish to follow him. God has shown the strength of his arm; he has brought down the powerful and lifted up those who have no power. He has kicked the rich out while filling the poor with food.

All of this God has done because of the promises he has made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses, to David, and to those who returned from the Exile. All of this God has done because of his faithfulness.

It would be easy to read Mary's song as a complete reversal of fortunes, with the rich becoming poor and the poor becoming rich.

"This is not to obliterate the powerful so that the lowly can achieve the positions of honor and privilege to which they previously had no access. Rather, God is at work in individual lives (like Mary) and in the social order as a whole in order to subvert the very structure of society that supports and perpetuates such distinctions" (Green, 105).

As a whole, Mary celebrates God's work in the past and identifies that what takes place in her and Elizabeth's wombs is a continuation of those mighty acts. Salvation, which God brought in the past, is now present in Jesus.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. Mary sets out on a perilous three-day, seventy-mile journey to visit her relative, Elizabeth. Why would she do this?