

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹In those days Mary got up and hurried to the hill country, to a town of Judah. ⁴⁰She entered the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹Just as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²She called out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴In fact, just now, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy! ⁴⁵Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!"

⁴⁶Then Mary said,

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,

⁴⁸because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹because the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones.

He has lifted up the lowly.

⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty.

⁵⁴He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,

⁵⁵as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.

Greatness

I.

Greatness is all about statistics, isn't it? Every sport has its list of statistics; for every sport there are fans who can quote the statistics with authority. This time of the year, football dominates the sports statistics screens. The fans talk about yards per carry; yards per catch; yards *after* the catch; completion to interception ratio.

I have a statistic for you: 6.5. Remember that number, we'll get back to it later.

Setting aside the 6.5, let's turn to a completely different statistic. The pregnant women in today's Gospel were statistically unusual—unique, even.

The first of the two was called Elizabeth. She was married to Zechariah, a priest who served in the temple. Luke calls them: "Righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and righteous decrees of the Lord" (Luke 1:6, EHV). They had no children, though Luke says they were both "Well along in years" (Luke 1:7, EHV). There were no fertility clinics back then. Without such a clinic, pregnancy was statistically impossible. But an angel had promised just such a pregnancy. By the time the younger woman came to call on her, Elizabeth was more than 6 months pregnant.

The other pregnant woman was an even more unlikely candidate for pregnancy—she was a virgin. To be sure, she was engaged to be married, and in those days engagement was really the lifetime promise that Mary would be and remain the wife of Joseph. Still, Mary and Joseph had followed the laws of Moses; they had not had a sexual relationship before their official wedding date. But an angel from God had appeared to Mary. He told her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, EHV). In simple faith, Mary believed what the angel had said.

Was Mary a stunning beauty who turned the heads of all who saw her? Would companies have wanted to line up to make her the spokes-model for fashion or cosmetics? As for Elizabeth, was she the perfect candidate for some anti-aging cream because she has aged so well?

Luke never mentions what the women looked like. An older woman who was the wife of a priest, and another who was just another young lady—a virgin.

When she saw Mary coming, Elizabeth said: “Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43, EHV). When Mary spoke about herself, she said that God had: “Looked with favor on the humble state of his servant” (Luke 1:48, EHV). Neither of the two women thought of herself as statistically “great;” perhaps outsiders wouldn’t have seen them as statistically great, either.

II.

Greatness. For many, wealth and power are the measurements of success. Pride in what they have managed to achieve in life is very satisfying. While the proud, the rich, and the powerful are impressed with themselves, Mary rightly says that God: “Has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones... ⁵³ the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:51-53, EHV).

Advent is a season of repentance. It’s a time when each one is to reflect on his or her own lack of perfection. Advent highlights the imperfection of human beings. One of our Wednesday evening services focused on the first sin. Adam and Eve *were* perfect. God gave them just one command to show their love for him: “Don’t eat from this one tree.” But a snake started talking to them as they stood near that one tree. He convinced them that eating a piece of fruit would somehow make them equal with God. They listened, and ate, and sin entered the world.

Statistically, you might not have a Perfect Person Rating, but you’ve done pretty well. Perhaps you aren’t rich or powerful, but all of us at times have a prideful attitude. Human nature urges each of us to compare ourselves with someone who has done things that look much worse than some of the things we have done. We ignore other things we have done and how some of those things might compare with others.

But frankly, measuring yourself against others isn’t the correct standard. The Bible tells us: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, EHV). Statistically, none of us is perfect. The ability to be perfect, as the Heavenly Father demands, has been impossible ever since the first sin was committed. Statistically, 100% of people are sinners in need of a Savior.

III.

Greatness. Neither of the two women in today’s Gospel looked to themselves or their own abilities. Neither of them thought that, statistically, *they* were great. They each looked elsewhere for true greatness.

Elizabeth said: “Blessed is she who believed, because the promises spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled!” (Luke 1:45, EHV). Elizabeth didn’t think Mary was *great*, but *blessed*. God had made a promise to Mary, and Mary believed it.

Mary didn’t speak about her own greatness, either. She sang: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47, EHV). *God* was the One who was great. God’s greatness was worth talking about.

Even the proud, rich, or powerful by human standards can’t live up to the standards of perfection God demanded. Their riches and power can’t buy them forgiveness or perfection before the throne of God. God didn’t just demonstrate his greatness to Mary and Elizabeth. He demonstrated his greatness to all of humanity. No matter what our status among other

human beings, before God and his power and his holiness we are humbled. Each of us could say with Mary: “He has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant” (Luke 1:48, EHV).

And he has. “He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, ⁵⁵as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever” (Luke 1:54-55, EHV). In Mary’s womb, at the time she sang her song, was Savior God had promised to send in his mercy. The time had fully come. God was sending his Son. God was sending the One who would deal with all the pride we have in our own accomplishments; he would deal with the attempts we make to be like God, or to put ourselves above God and his will.

Jesus paid for the sins of the world. Mary’s song is completely right: “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50, EHV). From generation to generation we pass down the greatness of God. From generation to generation we praise his wondrous plan that brought baby Jesus to the womb of Mary, and to the straw-filled manger and, ultimately, to the cross.

IV.

The heading in Most Bibles that begins Mary’s words of today’s Gospel says either “Mary’s Song,” or “The Magnificat.” Magnificat is Latin for “magnifies.” Mary’s song was all about magnifying God—of pointing out the greatness of God.

The Lutheran church has sometimes been called the singing church. As much as some things have changed through the years, that still remains true. There are lots of other churches that sing hymns. These days, many churches let a band or a praise group do most of the work of singing.

Lutherans like to join in. We use a liturgical style of worship. That means that lots of parts of our service are set to music, and the congregation sings along. We have a hymnal full of Psalms and hymns; sometimes we sing additional hymns or the Psalm of the day set to music different than what is found in the hymnal, so we print out the music.

The Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs chosen for our hymnal and others used in our worship focus on the greatness of God and what he has done for us, rather than on emotions. Music sets a tone for worship. In Lent there are more minor keys because of the somber nature of the season, realizing all Jesus had to carry in bringing about God’s plan of salvation. Easter is filled with joy because God’s plan has been completed.

Advent, like Lent, is a penitential season—a season of repentance. Even so, Advent is less somber than Lent, because it looks forward to God sending Jesus. Christmas music rejoices that the Savior is here.

Back to my statistic—6.5. Have you thought of what statistic that might be? There are 10 services this year in the Advent and Christmas seasons. Four are the Sundays in Advent, two midweek Advent services, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and two Sundays after Christmas. Our current hymnal has 65 hymns in the Advent and Christmas sections of the hymnal; there are actually more that are in the hymnal that fit Advent or Christmas well, but are in other sections of the hymnal. In order to use all 65 this year, we would need to average 6.5 hymns per service.

Lutherans want to focus on the greatness of God. For our worship we set aside the sleigh bells and the gently falling snow for a time and focus our attention on the great things God has done for us in sending the Savior and the holiness of his name.

True greatness is found in God’s gift to the world. Keep your attention focused on his greatness this Christmas and always. Amen.