

December 19, 2021
Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Near-Death Experience”

Luke 1:39-45

Shouldn't you be dead? Serious question. If you look back over your life, how many times did you make a mistake, take a risk or just outright do something so stupid that it could have or should have killed you? In my experience it's a miracle that any teenage boy ever makes it into his twenties! Or how many times have you been sick and medical science or miracle saved you? Think about how many close calls and near misses you've had with disaster in your life; how many times you looked up at the last second before catastrophe struck. I don't think that's luck. I think that is God's angels doing their job and saving your skin. Without divine intervention we'd be toast. Without God's mercy, the prince of this world would have destroyed it long ago just in order to grieve its Creator.

Sin means death. Apart from God's grace, life simply does not exist for us. Our simple, joyful Gospel lesson testifies to this.

Elizabeth and Mary meet; two women bearing life in their wombs. But by every metric of the fallen world this should not be taking place. Elizabeth is an old, barren woman. Her pregnancy is so bizarre that she hid herself for her first five months! When she found herself with child, she described it as her “reproach among people” being taken away, as if a curse had been lifted.

I can't begin to understand the devastation a woman experiences when she wishes to but is unable to conceive and bear a child. I've read about it, but you can tell, there are not enough words to encompass the grief. Elizabeth's joy at her womb which was dead being made alive by God must have been beyond ecstasy. And yet Elizabeth recognizes something even greater is happening inside Mary.

Mary's womb was another place where there should not be life. Virgins don't have babies. And yet Mary, a sinner worthy of the death all sin deserves, is miraculously blessed to be the very mother of God! She is the vessel who shall bear divine holiness into sinful humanity! It's no wonder that Elizabeth seems to almost react with more joy over Mary's pregnancy than her own: *“Blessed are you among women, and blessed the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”* And, of course, even unborn baby John gets into the act. *“For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”*

So presented to us in the Gospel is what to the world is not at all an uncommon sight; two pregnant women talking to each other about babies. But what is not seen is a divine reality and a cause for insurmountable joy—the herald of the Messiah leading the way and the coming of the very Son of God who will save His people from their sins. Mary and Elizabeth are rejoicing at the reality of what is unseen.

In light of this it should not be lost on us what Elizabeth praises about Mary as she finishes her exclamation: *“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”* Elizabeth praises not Mary's purity, piety or innocence. Elizabeth praises Mary's faith.

This wonderful, joyful picture from Christ's first advent upon earth spells out the reality of Christ's present advent in our lives; that which does not look like anything special to the

world is, in fact, divine deliverance. And this true gift of deliverance is received by faith simply because God makes great promises to us and, by His grace, we have been able to believe them.

It's kind of tragically ironic that when we think of Advent in the present, we tend to think of it as the "Christmas season," the busy weeks leading up to December 24—we make the Advent season in our present all about Christ's advent in the past. That's so wrong.

What is Advent, the advent of Jesus in our present? It really is the reality of what is unseen—God doing His deliverance right now! It's like Elizabeth and Mary not looking like anything special when in reality the redemption of mankind is being delivered!

And why is this important to you? Because, shouldn't you be dead? Dead first off like I was talking about earlier whereby this earthly life is snuffed out absent our Creator's preservation and protection. But shouldn't you be dead to that Father in heaven because that curse of the first sin, "...in the day you eat of it surely you shall die" is passed down to you through time, and if that weren't bad enough you daily sin on your own—an outright rebellion against God? Face reality: without God's intervention you stand damned forever despite the few years of grace He might allow in this life.

But what is your unseen reality? Life where there should be death. Blessing where there should be barrenness! Christ arriving to save His people, you, His person, from their sins!

Y'all know what I'm about to say: the Word, the washing, the Supper—the means of His grace by which He delivers the goods of forgiveness, life and salvation. This creates redeemed life to God in a person where barren waste and death once ruled. The new "conception" of life happened in your Holy Baptism and continues 24/7 in your life as a Christian!

So what's my point in all this? Shouldn't you be dead? Yes, you should...but you're not! That should make you feel great! Joyful! Relieved and thankful! That should make you feel blessed beyond all understanding like Elizabeth and Mary! You should be rejoicing in the reality that is unseen!

If you've ever had a near-death experience there's this moment just after it passes when you're filled with excitement and relief, knowing the darkness came for you and yet you still stand in the light of life. That's the reality of Christ's forgiveness. Death had hold over you because of sin. Satan owned you because of sin. You were dead in your trespasses.

But Christ has snatches you from death's clutches. Now every time you hear the absolution, every time you make the sign of the cross in remembrance of your baptism, every time you leave the table of the Lord's Supper, you can feel that same rush. Death that gripped you stands defeated once again and always!

If you aren't feeling that way, if the forgiveness of your sins has become a humdrum and stagnant routine to your heart, I suggest you ponder where you stand without it. You are barren of hope. Death clings to you without it...and not the death to this life all will ultimately face unless Jesus' second advent dawns first. I'm talking about the death to God that is ultimately to be banished from His presence forever, experiencing the barrenness of every one of His blessings forever. The death that is every blessing of this life removed and being replaced by absolutely nothing, at least nothing good, and that's putting the best possible spin on things.

Realize that alternative and rejoice because that is not you! Life has been poured upon you who were dead. The light shines in the darkness of death and it shines on you. There has been a fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord—the Savior has come and won victory over the cross and death, and that victory is yours as a gift.

Believe in your own near-death experience. You were dead in your trespasses, but Jesus declares you alive—your sins stand forgiven and you live with Him forever. Trust the unseen

Gospel reality that saves. Elizabeth's words to Mary echo to you through the centuries; Blessed are you who believes that there has been a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by the Lord.