

ADVENT: IN FAITH WE WAIT EXPECTANTLY FOR THE LORD

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 24, 2006

Malachi 5:2-5a

Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

Blessed Are You

Blessed are you ...

Blessed is the fruit of your womb ...

Blessed is she who believed ...

A declaration in which God's favor or blessing is experienced is known as a beatitude. When we hear that word, we may think of those nine beatitudes recorded in Matthew's Gospel from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (5:3-11). But here, in today's reading from Luke's Gospel, three beatitudes are voiced by Elizabeth, the mother of Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist. The account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth brings together the two preceding stories in Luke's Gospel – the announcements of the births of John the Baptist (1:5-25) and Jesus (1:26-38).

“With a loud cry” Elizabeth greets Mary with a beatitude as her own “child leaps in her womb” (1:41). There is no indication that Elizabeth had any prior knowledge of the angel's announcement to Mary. Luke is thus telling us that the Holy Spirit is the source of Elizabeth's knowledge of Mary's pregnancy. While her husband Zechariah has been rendered speechless (1:20), Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (1:41), is given voice, and her declaration fulfills the angel's announcement to Zechariah that their child “will be filled with the Holy Spirit” even before his birth (1:15).

Elizabeth's greeting to Mary is in the form of a four-part prophetic utterance about:

- ◆ the blessedness of Mary and the child to be born to her (1:42)
- ◆ the identity of the child in Mary's womb (1:43)
- ◆ the reason for the movement Elizabeth felt in her womb (1:44)
- ◆ the affirmation of Mary's faith and the fulfillment of the Lord's promise (1:45)

The oracles of Elizabeth are followed by Mary's song of praise (Magnificat) which parallels closely Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and the opening verses of Psalm 34. In calling God her “Savior” (1:47), Mary expresses confidence and faith that God's promise of redemption will surely be fulfilled. God is our Savior who will come to us as a vulnerable baby, yet who will reverse the worldly standards and the status quo. The

powerful will be brought down and the lowly will be lifted up; the rich will be sent away empty and the hungry will be filled with good things (1:52, 53).

Mary's song is a message to us today that we are to look to no other power, and she echoes the words of the psalmist: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help" (146:3, *NRSV*).

In this final day of the Advent season, we, like Mary, now wait. We wait in faith and with hope for the birth of the Holy One, the Savior of the world. The Mighty One has indeed done great things for us!

Blessed are we!

This week's Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Afghanistan

– With continued prayers for peace and for God to provide opportunities for people to distribute the Scriptures, particularly the Dari New Testament and Dari Book of Genesis; **Iran** – With prayers that Christians will continue to experience God's protection and guidance and that they will remain faithful and be encouraged daily, and with prayers for the ongoing availability of Scriptures in appropriate languages despite restrictions on importing and printing; **Pakistan** – With thanks to God for the upcoming publishing of the first Urdu Study Bible, and with prayers for the Urdu Interlinear New Testament project that is now underway.

Activity Corner: "Blessing Cards"

Supplies needed: Bible; 3" x 5" index cards (or pieces of paper); drawing paper and crayons for young children; pens or pencils..

Read together Elizabeth's beatitudes (Luke 1:41-45). What brought Elizabeth joy? What did she say about Mary? Invite everyone to prepare a "blessing card" for someone, especially someone who may be in need of a word of encouragement. The "blessing" may be an affirmation of a way the intended recipient has blessed the sender, or an encouraging Scripture passage. Enclose the "blessing card" with a greeting card or note.