

Before Going to Bethlehem Join Mary and...

- I. Praise God for His amazing grace.
- II. Praise God for His mighty acts.
- III. Praise God for His great faithfulness.

Dear Christian friends,

There was a comic in **last Wednesday's** paper that caught my eye. It was the comic called "THATABABY." In the **first frame** mom is taking cookies out of the oven and SHRIEKS, "The Christmas cookies burned!!" in the **second frame** dad is panicking at the computer, "YEEK! The gift we were getting your dad is now out of stock!" In the **next frame** mom is upset. "GAK!! We've run out of wrapping paper!" and then the doorbell rings. In the **last frame** mom, dad and the baby open the door and THERE'S LINUS from the **Peanuts** comic strip. Picking up on the CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS special Linus says, "It sounds like someone needs to **be reminded** of the true meaning of Christmas."

In a sense that's what this fourth Sunday in Advent does – it reminds us of the TRUE MEANING of Christmas. **Christmas** is now just hours away. **Perhaps** were **feeling** FRAZZLED and STRESSED out. Today's readings have us TAKE A BREATHER. They tell us, "OK – settle down – remember what Christmas is REALLY ALL ABOUT – focus on the **real meaning** of Christmas."

As part of our LAST **preparations** for Christmas we turn to these verses – Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth, the **expectant mother** of John the Baptist. Like Mary here we're NOT YET IN Bethlehem for Jesus' birth. **Indeed**, BEFORE GOING to Bethlehem let's join Mary in PRAISING GOD – **praising** God 1)for His amazing grace, 2)for His mighty acts and 3)for His great faithfulness.

**I. Praise God for His amazing grace.**

WHEN the angel Gabriel informed Mary that she was to **be the mother** of the Savior he also mentioned that her **"relative"** Elizabeth was also expecting. Mary, who was living UP NORTH in **Nazareth** in **Galilee**, decided to go visit Elizabeth DOWN SOUTH in a **"town in the hill country of Judea."** Elizabeth welcomed Mary with the FAMILIAR words, **"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb** (Jesus)!"

It is very biblical to call Mary the BLESSED VIRGIN Mary. Mary was a **"virgin."** She and Joseph were **"betrothed in marriage"** but they were not yet living together as husband and wife. Virgins don't have babies but BY A MIRACLE of the Holy Spirit the virgin Mary had a baby. By that miracle of the virgin birth Jesus was BORN WITHOUT **original sin** and a **sinful nature**.

Mary was **"blessed."** Mary received a blessing NO OTHER WOMAN in **all the world** will ever enjoy – she was the human mother of the LONG-PROMISED Savior – the eternal, almighty Son of God born our **flesh-and-blood** brother.

Mary was so blessed by God yet she didn't let it GO TO HER HEAD. As her song shows Mary WANTED GOD to **get all** the glory and attention. Mary's song wasn't, "LOOK AT ME!" but rather, "LOOK WHAT GOD has **done for me!**" **"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, because He has looked with favor on the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for me."**

Notice Mary's ATTITUDE, **"He has looked with favor on the humble state of His servant."** Mary saw herself as **basically** a NOBODY. She wasn't better or more deserving than others. This was all God's doing – ALL GOD'S GRACE – His amazing undeserved love for a **sinner like her**.

Before going to Bethlehem JOIN MARY in praising God for His **amazing grace**. We can't claim the EXACT SAME blessing that God gave Mary but look again at what God's GRACE HAS MADE of us. Like Mary **"the humble state of His servant"** should describe our attitude. Like Mary we're NOBODIES in the eyes of the WORLD – and we should also be in OUR OWN eyes as well. There's no room for PRIDE or BRAGGING in our relationship with God. It's not that God is SO LUCKY to have us. But we nobodies are very special somebodies IN GOD'S eyes. Savor the words John wrote, **"See the kind of love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are!"** Recall Peter's, **"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."**

Before going to Bethlehem JOIN MARY and...

## II. Praise God for His mighty acts.

It's hard to miss the WONDER and AWE in Mary's song. Mary is carried away – SWEPT UP – in God's **mighty acts**. **"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, ...the Mighty One has done great things for me."**

**"God MY Savior."** That's the real meaning and joy and peace of Christmas, isn't it? We see the Baby Jesus in the manger. Don't be fooled by **appearances**. Don't get caught up in the SENTIMENTALITY – the **manger** - the **"no room for them in the inn."** Be overwhelmed and humbled with a REVERENT AWE. Our almighty Creator is born a HELPLESS BABY. That **"firstborn Son"** of the Virgin Mary is **"Immanuel"** – GOD HIMSELF with us – one of us.

Before going to Bethlehem BE CLEAR on why Jesus came here. Jesus didn't come to SIMPLY BE an example and role model for us. He didn't come to **give us** a SECOND CHANCE with God. The **"good news of great joy"** is that Jesus was born our **"Savior."** JOYFULLY JOIN Mary in singing. **"My spirit rejoices in God MY Savior."**

Before going to Bethlehem TAKE ANOTHER hard look at **yourself** – your heart and **daily life** – in **that mirror** of God's commandments. See yourself AS GOD SEES you **without Jesus**. We're not a PRETTY SIGHT, are we? Is your Christmas present to God this year a LIFE SO CLEANED up compared to last year – a heart so in love with God – hands so eager to **serve God** and **help others**? Are you going to Bethlehem with ALL KINDS OF GOOD things to **give God** – or are you going with a **"broken and contrite heart"** that craves God's **grace** and pleads for His **forgiveness**?

We're not going to Bethlehem BECAUSE WE **"have done great things"** for God but because **"the Mighty one has done great things"** for us. Christmas is JUST THE BEGINNING. Watch Jesus grow up and live every minute of His life with a PERFECT love for and obedience to His heavenly Father. That's the life WE OWED God but **never could** live. Jesus lived that life FOR US - He gives us all the credit for His holy life. Don't separate Christmas from Good Friday. Jesus was born in Bethlehem to one day die on **Calvary's cross** as the ALL-SUFFICIENT SACRIFICE for the sins of the whole world. PRAISE God that He **"didn't spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all"** – all to **"take away the sin of the world."** And don't separate Good Friday from Easter morning! We have a RISEN, LIVING Lord Jesus who shares with us **His victory** over death and hell. OH WHAT **"great things the Mighty One has done for (us)!"** Look what we ALL HAVE in Jesus and because of Jesus – forgiveness full and free for all our sins – peace with God – a whole new relationship with God – the privilege or prayer – the comfort of God's **presence** and **promises** – eternal life in heaven the **very moment** we die. DON'T WAIT until Christmas to **"proclaim the greatness of the Lord"** and to **"rejoice in God your Savior!"**

Go to Bethlehem understanding that CHRISTMAS SHOWS us God's way of **doing things**. **"He has shown strength with His arm. He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their**

**hearts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones. He has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty."**

To those "**proud in their thoughts**" – to those who want to be IMPRESSED with mighty displays of power – to those who think they know IT ALL and are smarter than God – to those who see themselves as IN CHARGE and in control of their lives – to those who think they're "**rich**" and DON'T NEED GOD interfering in their lives – to them **Christmas is cute** and nice but **not much more** than that. They foolishly rob themselves of ALL THE BLESSINGS God has for us in the Christ-child.

But to the WEAK and helpless – the "**lowly – hungry**" – WHAT BLESSINGS and comfort God gives us in the baby Jesus – His love and forgiveness – His peace and promises, etc. So before going to Bethlehem JOIN MARY in praising God for His mighty acts.

### III. Praise Him for His great faithfulness.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth "**for about three months and then returned home**" to Nazareth. But about six months later she and Joseph would make ANOTHER TRIP SOUTH – this time to "**Bethlehem in Judea.**" The timing probably SEEMED LOUSY to them. The trip was certainly filled with many INCONVENIENCES for them. But God was IN CONTROL – God was faithfully fulfilling His promises. "**He has come to the aid of His servant Israel, remembering His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever.**" Before going to Bethlehem JOIN MARY in praising God for his great faithfulness.

LEARN from your trip to Bethlehem that we don't always understand WHAT God is up to or JUST HOW God is working things out. Learn that it doesn't always look as if God IS IN CONTROL or that HE KNOWS what He's doing. So go to Bethlehem with Mary and LEARN WELL God's great faithfulness. God is always IN CONTROL of all things at all times. God always keeps His promises at just the right time ACCORDING TO His schedule. God always keeps His promises DOWN TO the last little detail no matter what it TAKES TO DO that. Go to Bethlehem and learn with Mary that rather than questioning God's ways we can CONFIDENTLY CLING to His promises. Rather than getting all worked up and WORRIED we can confidently trust God to WORK THINGS OUT as He knows best. Christmas proves once again God's great faithfulness.

It is almost time for US TO GO to Bethlehem. Be sure to join Mary in PRAISING GOD as you make this trip. God's blessings on your Christmas this year! Amen.

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