

The 4th Sunday in Advent
December 19, 2021

The Lessons: Micah 5:2-5a
 Psalm 80:1-7
 Hebrews 10:5-10
 Luke 1:39-56

The Hymns: # 357 *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*
 # 353 *Jesus Came, the Heavens Adoring*
 # 933 *My Soul Rejoices*

The Collect: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 The House of Zechariah
 Luke 1:39-45 & 56

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the days of King David, when the Ark of the Covenant was in the town of Ba'ale-judah, there came a time when an attempt was made "to bring up from there the Ark of God, which is called by the Name of the LORD of Hosts Who sits enthroned on the cherubim" (2 Samuel 6:2). And so, the people carried the Ark on a new cart and made haste to bring it into the hill country. When an unclean hand reached up and took hold of the Ark of God that man died. Unwilling to move the Ark any farther, David took it into a nearby house. The Bible tells us that "the Ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obededom the Gittite three months; and the LORD blessed Obededom and all his household" (2 Samuel 6:11).

Centuries later the Church proclaims this truth when she sings ...

"Oh, blest the house, whate'er befall,
 Where Jesus Christ is all in all!
 Yea, if He were not dwelling there.
 How dark and poor and void it were!"

It has been said that a family turns a house into a home. The gracious Presence of the LORD turns a house into a temple. That is the situation when Mary carries the unborn, recently incarnate Christ into ... The House of Zechariah.

Our text tells us:

"In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed

with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.' ... And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home."

Today we behold the time when the Lord suddenly came into the house of Zechariah and instantly transformed an earthly dwelling into a temple wherein the Divine dwells. Two impregnable women are now pregnant; that is, the old barren woman and the young virgin are both with child. As a result, they are bursting with the joyous Good News.

Mary crosses the threshold of the house and speaks the word of greeting to Elizabeth, even as the silent Word resides within Mary. Zechariah can only listen the two women and ponder all these things in his heart. Elizabeth's baby can only leap for joy when the word of greeting is heard. Mary bears the Incarnate Word across the doorsill and announces His Presence. Elizabeth speaks well of her young cousin and praises the Lord, which is the Fruit of the virgin's womb.

The LORD Himself enters the house of Zechariah and the place becomes a Temple of the Most High. But who are these within the walls of this simple dwelling?

First of all, there is Zechariah the sinner. When an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told over-the-hill Zechariah that he and old Elizabeth would have a son and were to name him John, the old priest "said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.' And the angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel, who stand in the Presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this Good News. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time'" (Luke 1:18-20).

Zechariah represents all those who doubt the promises of God and question the messengers of the Word who were called and sent to them to bring them the Good News. The Word of the Gospel is preached to such people and they ask, "How shall I know that this Jesus is God? How shall I know that Christ atoned for all my sins? How shall I know that I am really forgiven? How shall I know that Jesus rose from the dead? How shall I know that the Lord is preparing a place for me in Paradise? How shall I know _____" - hey, you fill in the blanks, for surely you, like Zechariah, have doubted God's Good News and questioned His messenger.

The LORD enters the house of Zechariah and the place becomes a Temple of the Most High. But who are these within the walls of this simple dwelling?

Consider Elizabeth. Now here, neither on the surface nor in the Scriptures, there appears to be nothing specifically said about her particular sins. But Elizabeth is like all those sweet, little old ladies who sit in church. I mean, who would accuse them of venial, let alone, mortal sins? Who would say that out of their "hearts come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Matthew 15:19)? Well, the Lord says it in Psalm 14: "The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that act wisely, that seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one"

The LORD enters the house of Zechariah and the place becomes a Temple of the Most High. But who are these within the walls of this simple abode?

There's Mary! What about Mary the mother of God? She confesses her sin and her need for salvation when she sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). So Mary also confesses her need for a Savior from sin and rejoices that her unborn son is that very Savior!

Okay, there's the unborn John! How about him? Well, John would be born as a result of the union of a man and woman ... of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Therefore, John bears the image of Adam (Genesis 5:3) and what the psalmist says of each of us is true for John as well ... "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5).

Dear friends, the house of Zechariah is blessed because the LORD God is graciously present within it. The Incarnate and unborn Son of God, no bigger than a peanut, turns the house of Zechariah into a temple of the Most High. Mary speaks the Word of her Savior within her and magnifies the Lord. She is not saved because she bears the burden of the Son of God in her womb, but because the Son of God bore her burdens of sin and sins to the cross for her. Elizabeth hears the Word of God's arrived Advent and she is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims that Mary is the mother of her Lord. Elizabeth's Lord and Savior has entered the house and she is in His Presence.

John hears the Word, is filled with the Holy Spirit, is given the gift of faith and then responds with a jump of joy. Truly, "this is the LORD's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:23).

As for Zechariah, his house is blessed by the Word that he hears. Living in God's grace and mercy, though certainly silent, the forgiven priest of the division of Abijah ponders all that he heard from Gabriel, Mary and Elizabeth. On the eighth day after the birth of his only son, the old man's mouth will be opened and he will speak.

He will speak first of the blessedness of the Advent and Visitation of the Lord. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old" (Luke 1:68-70).

Second, Zechariah declares the Word concerning his son, John: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the Way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79).

But we get ahead of ourselves. For three months the House of Zechariah, now become a temple of the Lord, were surely some of the most joyous and blessed days shared by all, especially Elizabeth and Mary. But look, the time is up. Ninety days have passed. Elizabeth is due. Mary will be beginning to show. As "the Ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obededom the Gittite three months; and the

LORD blessed Obededom and all his household" (2 Samuel 6:11), so Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned to her home.

Mary took the road down from the hill country and to her home in a city of Galilee named Nazareth. Joseph, her betrothed, is there. Caesar Augustus has issued a decree. Within six months the Incarnate Son of God will be on another journey -- on the Judean road from Nazareth "to the city of David which is called Bethlehem". In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.