

The Meeting of Mary and Elisabeth

Rev. J. Driessen - Luke 1:39-45

Sing: The Song of Zacharias:1

Read: Luke 1:26-45

Sing: Psalter 175:1-4

Sing: Psalter 424:2

Sing: Psalter 362:1-3

Congregation, the portion of Scripture that we wish to consider with the help of the Lord is found in what we have read together in Luke 1. We will particularly consider the verses 39 to 45, but I will read only verse 45:

“And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which

were told her from the Lord.”

This portion of Scripture draws our attention to the meeting of Mary and Elisabeth.

We will particularly consider four points:

1. Holy urgency
2. Spiritual joy
3. Awesome wonder
4. A rich beatitude

1. Holy urgency

Congregation, much has transpired in the temple in Jerusalem and in the humble home in Nazareth. The aged priest Zacharias heard from the angel Gabriel that his wife Elisabeth would bear a son who would be named John. And six months later, that same angel Gabriel made known to Mary in Nazareth that she would become the mother of God’s Son in His human manifestation.

This second miracle is even greater than the first. That the elderly Elisabeth would bear a son at her age was indeed a great wonder. Still, she became a mother in a natural way. Mary, however, would become a mother in a supernatural way. Unable therefore to comprehend this, she had asked God’s messenger, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”[verse 34]. Gabriel had answered her, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible” [verses 35-37].

Upon hearing this divine message, brought by Gabriel, Mary yielded unconditionally to the will of God saying, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” [verse 38]. Initially, the contemplative Mary pondered all of this quietly and privately. She carried the words of the angel with her as a great and deep secret. After all, with whom would she have been able to discuss these things? Joseph would not have understood and the people would have considered her to be adulterous.

The first stirrings of Christ’s arrival upon this earth were thus barely discernible. Even before His birth it is true what we find in Isaiah 42:2, “He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.” Just as He arrived in this world without commotion, so also, in the same way, He often comes into the life of a sinner. The heart of this or that boy or girl, this man or that woman, is seized by the Word of God, as His love draws them irresistibly, and so the desires of the heart become focused upon the Lord and His service. But this occurs quietly because they who are thus touched by the Word of God, through the Holy Spirit, do not want to make a public show of it. Rather, they seek a quiet place, alone, where they pour out their hearts before the Lord, as they miss Him and feel their guilt of sin. The Holy Spirit does not make a great commotion. Certainly, the Lord can work very powerfully. Think only of what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. Usually, however, the Holy Spirit performs His work quietly. Yet, when the Lord converts us, the Word is applied with power in our hearts through the work of the Spirit and we carry that same Word with us as a priceless treasure.

However, what has occurred in private does eventually become known. After Mary has pondered the promise of God’s Word, she desires to speak with others about these things. But with whom? Well, this is not so difficult. Gabriel had pointed the way in his message, “And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.” Thus Mary had received confirmation that the Word of God which had been proclaimed to her was true and with that assurance, she travels to the home of Elisabeth. Why? Because she desires to be strengthened in her faith in God’s promise, in His Word.

Isn’t this also how it is in the life of a believer? When through the work of the Holy Ghost the promises of God have become a reality in our hearts, then we begin to ask ourselves the question how we can persevere in that faith. There are many so-called believers who are not troubled by this. Apparently, they can believe whenever they wish. However, God’s children are spiritually poor in and of themselves. They cannot and do not appropriate anything unless it is given them from above. That is why their faith needs to be continuously strengthened. Faith cannot maintain itself. Also because the Prince of

Darkness does not sit still and, on top of that, our deceitful heart so often reasons along with the evil one, “Was it maybe just a dream? Did I only imagine it all?” That is why God’s children crave further instruction and strengthening of their faith. This was also the case with Mary. A holy urgency and haste, wrought by her faith, fills her heart. “And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah.” In faith, Mary hastens to visit Elisabeth.

Perhaps you ask, “Do faith and haste go together?” Don’t we read in Scripture, “He that believeth shall not make haste” (Isaiah 28:16)? Certainly, faith can patiently wait for the Lord. And yet, there is a holy urgency in the life of faith. Scripture mentions, for example, “Escape for thy life” (Genesis 19:17). And we read of the shepherds, “And they came with haste” (Luke 2:16). Oh, congregation, has it already become an urgent matter in your life, a matter of haste? Yes, I know how busy we all can be in our daily lives. We have so much to do. There is no end of things that need to be done and places where we need to go. However, has it already become an urgent matter in your life to come to the Lord? To come to Him with the need of your soul? Has reconciliation with God become urgent for you? Do you come with haste to the place where the treasures of God’s grace are dispensed? Are you hastening, with the psalmist, to follow God’s commandments?

Oh, when the seriousness of our sinful reality is bound upon our heart, would we then not hasten ourselves to beg the heavenly Judge for mercy? Or would we not hasten ourselves when we have caught a glimpse of the blessed Lamb of God? Oh, do you know by experience what it means when He, in His seeking love, comes to you and claims your heart? If Christ has become precious to you, then you will make haste. Then you will do as Bartimaeus did, when he cast off everything that hindered him, in order to be able to move quickly and to bow at the feet of the Saviour. And know this: Whosoever cometh to Him, He will in no wise cast out. Faith also hastens not to neglect the use of the means of grace for its confirmation and strengthening. Therefore, God’s children are in the right pathway when they hasten to attend the ministration of God’s Word, or when they partake of the Lord’s Supper, showing the Lord’s death, so that their weak faith may be nourished and strengthened by the Lord.

Mary is filled with a holy urgency to meet Elisabeth, although this means that she has to make a long and difficult journey; also a journey that was not without danger. Faith, however, looks beyond that, looks beyond all the dangers and obstacles. Luther said, “It would have been appropriate if a golden coach had been readied for her, led by four thousand horses, with messengers, trumpets in hand, proclaiming, “Behold the most blessed among women.” But, none of that honour and glamour is here. No, this poor young

woman undertakes the journey on foot. Yet, she is the mother of God's Son. It would not have been surprising if the very mountains and hills had danced for joy! But, Mary travels alone along the long road from Nazareth to Hebron, as a poor sinner in and of herself, yet chosen by God to take on this special role in the history of salvation. "And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah." She is driven by a passionate desire to share her secret with Elisabeth, and for that she is more than willing to undertake the difficult, long journey.

Congregation, everyone in whom the Lord has glorified His grace can relate to this. Then there is a longing for someone with whom one can have a heart-to-heart conversation about the wonders of God. Then there is a strong desire to praise God together, as we have sung from Psalter 175:

*Come hear, all ye that fear the Lord,
While I with grateful heart record
What God has done for me;
I cried to Him in deep distress,
And now His wondrous grace I bless,
For He has set me free.*

Here we also notice the Lord's tender care for Mary. Let us not forget that Mary is going to face a very difficult time. For Elisabeth, the shame of her former barrenness has been removed, but for Mary, the humiliation and the reproach of Christ is about to begin. What will the people say when it becomes apparent that she is with child? More particularly, what will Joseph think of this? Oh, the path that Mary must travel is one of much strife and many afflictions.

However, notice God's faithful care, as at the beginning of this pathway, she may strengthen herself in fellowship with the God-fearing Elisabeth. Let us not underestimate the importance of the communion of saints in the life of God's children. True, there are moments when there is a need to be alone--moments when, as it were, there is a need to speak privately with God. But there are also moments that we should avoid being alone and instead seek the blessing of godly fellowship. Being alone can foster doubt and unbelief, whereas fellowship in the Lord can help avoid much spiritual darkness. How encouraging can a heart-to-heart conversation be! Also here it is true, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Thus is the Lord's will, because in the communion of the saints, it is experienced that shared grief halves the burden but shared joy is doubly joyful. That is why Calvin explained, "Mary's objective on the one hand was to be strengthened in her faith, and on the other hand to glorify, together with Elisabeth, the grace that has been granted to both of them."

“And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah.” Would fear and anxiety not have crept up within her on the way to Hebron? Oh, undoubtedly she will have anxiously questioned in her heart whether Elisabeth would understand her. But, behold! The meeting with Elisabeth becomes a meeting full of spiritual joy.

This is what we will now consider in our second point.

2. Spiritual joy

Mary has arrived at her destination. As she enters the home of the priest she greets Elisabeth. Likely, this was the normal greeting of that time, “God be with you” and “Peace be with you.” However, suddenly these words now take on a much deeper meaning. After all, Mary is the mother of the Lord! By way of Mary, it is as if the Lord Himself comes to Elisabeth. The Word that is being made flesh enters the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Indeed, what peace now descends upon the home of this priest! For months there have been hardly any words spoken in this house, as Zacharias could not speak. Likely he shared a few things with his wife by writing some notes. However, Elisabeth has had to process many things in solitude. It may even be that a certain estrangement had developed between these two aged people. Recall that Zacharias had not believed the words of the angel Gabriel and he had become mute. On the other hand, Elisabeth did believe but had no one to speak with concerning these things.

But now, suddenly and unexpectedly, Mary has come to visit her. However, she does not even need to explain the reason for her visit. Elisabeth appears to be fully informed of the grace that has befallen Mary. It is as if the Holy Spirit had preceded Mary.

Picture in your mind these two women meeting each other. One, a young woman from the remote, humble town of Nazareth; the other, the aged wife of a priest. A great contrast, to be sure. And yet, the Lord establishes a bond which dissolves any differences and contrasts. These two women come together in the mutual joy of faith and in the certainty of God’s promises. Tears of joy and wonder undoubtedly flowed.

Then, something wonderful occurs. The moment Mary greets Elisabeth, the yet unborn John leaps in Elisabeth’s womb, and Elisabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. As we read in verse 41, “And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost.” The unborn child that Elisabeth had already carried for six months himself expresses his joy of meeting the yet unborn Messiah. Now already it becomes reality what the angel Gabriel had said to Zacharias at the altar in the temple, “And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15b). Even before his birth, John leaps for soul-rapturing joy.

This is the first encounter between the King and His herald, although they are both yet to be born. This is the first meeting of “the Messenger of the covenant who suddenly would come to His temple,” as Malachi 3:1 describes Him, and the messenger that shall prepare the way before Him. This is the first encounter between the last priest of the generation of Levi and the great and only Priest who belongs to the order of Melchizedek. Now in this meeting a great wonder occurs-- the wonder that Levi glorifies Judah and Aaron kneels before Melchizedek. The priesthood of Aaron comes to an end, because the great Priest of the house of God is coming and His will be an eternal Priesthood. Indeed, John is the son of a priest, but he will not be wearing the priestly robes anymore, he will not partake of the priest’s bread anymore, neither will he be conducting any priestly services anymore. Another Priest is coming; the great and only High Priest of the house of God, He, who by one offering hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified (see Hebrews 10:14).

What an intimate relationship these two will have. The Bridegroom comes to offer His life for His bride. And the friend of the Groom will recruit His bride. He will rejoice at the voice of the Bridegroom and it is the Holy Spirit who already gives evidence of this while John is as yet in Elisabeth’s womb--it causes the little babe to leap for joy within her.

Notice how John the Baptist thus honours Him who would come after him, even before he was born. Even now we see the evidence of what he will proclaim later, “Whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose” (John 1:27).

Congregation, what a wondrous encounter this is in the history of redemption! What a wondrous meeting takes place between Mary and Elisabeth! Yet, the essence of this narrative is not at all about the meeting between these two women. Instead, it is clearly about the encounter between Christ and His messenger. Zion’s eternal King, who is fairer than the children of men, is saluted and honoured by His messenger. Even now, before his birth, John rejoices in Him. This joy, that already becomes evident in this meeting, remained with him during his entire life.

After all, it is his greatest joy to be privileged to be the friend of the Bridegroom who brings the bride to Christ! Later, when he will notice that his disciples leave him to follow the Lord Jesus (we would say that they forsook John to follow the Messiah), nevertheless, John will say of this, “This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30).

The joy of John is a very special joy. Yet, congregation, all those whose hope is in the Lord, all those who wait on Him know something of this joy regarding the coming Christ. When He comes to us and the Holy Spirit opens our eyes for Him in His glory, in His beauty, in His appropriateness, in His love, and in His amiableness, then our hearts are filled with

unspeakable joy. Then we understand that of which the psalmist sang, *“Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!”*

Oh, possibly you ask, “How do I obtain this joy?” Well, the Holy Spirit creates this spiritual joy by means of the Word. “And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary...” When we hear the Word and when the Holy Spirit attends this with faith, then our soul is drawn out to Him on account of His word. Elisabeth had not yet seen Him, but she believed, because her eye was enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Oh, that lifts up the soul of all those who wait for the Lord Jesus, because He has become precious to them.

Perhaps there are those among us who at times are very discouraged, with many unanswered questions in their heart. Here then, I counsel you, “Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry” (Habakkuk 2:3). However unclear everything may seem now, presently everything will be clarified and your heart will sing in awesome wonder.

This is what we will consider in our third point.

3. Awesome wonder

We read in verses 41 and 42, “And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” Have you noticed? The words that are spoken by Elisabeth are almost identical to those previously spoken to Mary by the angel Gabriel. It is almost as if Elisabeth had been present when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. What a confirmation and strengthening of faith this must have been for Mary. Remember that at this time her pregnancy was not yet physically obvious.

Congregation, even today, it is the same God and the same Holy Spirit who confirms His Word and who strengthens faith. How does the Lord do this? The Lord always does this by way of His Word and in the way of obedience. Notice that Mary went the way that had been pointed out to her by the angel Gabriel. In obediently going that way, she was strengthened in her faith. When we seek the strengthening of our faith apart from means the Lord has appointed, we will not receive a blessing from Him. On the contrary, when we seek it without the means, we become unfruitful for ourselves as well as for others. However, in the way of using the means and in fellowship with one another, our faith is strengthened and in that way, the Lord will also be praised and magnified.

Now, Elisabeth is considerably older and is much more experienced than Mary. Yet, she highly respects this young woman, because of the work of the Lord. “And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (verse 43).

This event, this meeting, is as it were a prelude to Christmas. It is as if the Saviour Himself has come to visit Elisabeth. Notice how she said “the mother of my Lord.” That is where the emphasis is. The Word is being made flesh. He has humbled Himself to such a degree that He arrives in this world in the mother’s womb. Yet, He is the Lord. Yet, He is God, who is over all, God blessed for ever.

Elisabeth confesses the unborn Child within Mary as her King and Saviour. As Thomas would later confess, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). Soon, Simeon in the temple would also confess, “For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation” (Luke 2:30). Oh, Elisabeth is already celebrating Christmas, even before the dawning of that day in Bethlehem.

It is especially a feeling of amazement and wonder that fills her heart. We say, “Of course! What else would we expect?” Because whoever is privileged to meet the Saviour always comes away with a sense of awesome wonder. Elisabeth says, “And whence is this to me?” Who is behind this? Who sent the Lord to me? Elisabeth asks this, and soon her husband will provide the answer, as he would prophesy, “Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the Dayspring from on high hath visited us” (Luke 1:78).

The Saviour is the gift of God in His good pleasure. He comes forth as a result of the eternal good pleasure of God--impossible to comprehend, and only to be adored. It is all because of free grace that moved Him from all eternity.

“And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Do you hear the amazement? The wonder? Do you hear the joy? It is as if Elisabeth says, “How is this possible? How do I deserve this? And this ... for me?” As Luther wrote, “Elisabeth would have thought, ‘I, a poor, miserable and contemptible woman, how did I merit this honour? Why didst Thou not go instead to the wife of Annas or Caiaphas? Why didst Thou come to me, a wrinkled old woman who was barren and the object of contempt for so long?’” No, in her own eyes Elisabeth is not a highly meritorious woman who had expected this honour. On the contrary, she is totally amazed, “Who am I, Lord, that Thou comest to me?”

Congregation, those two words “to me” actually capture the entire gospel of God’s mercy. Just these two words, “to me.” Not “me to Him,” but “He to me.” May God give that we would understand something of this wonder as we approach Christmas, because a Christmas without this amazement is not truly Christmas. Where the awe in wonder is lacking, grace simply becomes a matter of calculation. This reasoning goes something like this: I am a sinner and Jesus is the Saviour who came to save sinners. Case closed. However,

if that is how it is in our lives, so cold and so calculated, then I guarantee that you have never met the Saviour. The wonder of grace lies in the fact that meeting the Saviour is incomprehensible and irrational, and yet, that it is the truth. Then a sinner can only confess, “Oh, God, I have never asked for Thee to visit me. Lord, I have never sought Thee or asked for Thee. Yet, Thou came, Thou came to me, a miserable ungodly sinner.”

Mephiboseth knew something of this awesome wonder when he entered David’s palace and bowed down saying, “What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?” (2 Samuel 9:8). The centurion also confessed this, “Lord, trouble not Thyself: for I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof” (Luke 7:6). Oh, there is no better preparation for Christmas, no better anticipation of the advent season, than that we learn to write ourselves off, as Simon Peter exclaimed, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Then we learn to understand the wonder and joy that the Lord cares for us, in spite of ourselves.

What an eternal wonder, congregation. He comes to me! It begins with Him. May that be an encouragement for those who cannot approach God in their own strength. May it be of great comfort for those whose arms are unable to embrace Him, and whose legs are too weak and powerless to flee unto Him. Listen! He comes to you! Soon, at Christmas, it will be proclaimed again, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). We will sing of that from Psalter 424:2,

*He has remembered all His mercy,
His truth declared to Israel;
The ends of earth have seen His glory;
His ways in majesty excel.
Then make a joyful noise before Him,
O all ye earth, His praises sing;
With loud acclaim let all adore Him
And let the joyful anthems ring.*

4. A rich beatitude

“And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.” Finally, a beatitude, a benediction flows from Elisabeth’s lips, the first such beatitude in the gospel, “And blessed is she that believed.”

It is possible that thoughts of pain and shame regarding her husband have crossed Elisabeth’s mind. The young Mary could have caused the old servant to be ashamed. Sometimes younger people are an example for older ones. Perhaps you have noticed this amongst your own children or younger ones in the congregation. How freely and openly

they can sometimes speak about the things pertaining to God's Word. Congregation, be careful not to cast suspicion on that, but be thankful to God for this and beg Him for instruction from the Holy Spirit, so that the seed of the gospel might find root in young hearts and, consequently, that the seed might germinate and bear fruit to God's honour and to the welfare of His church here on earth.

"And blessed is she that believed." Mary indeed believed. She confessed that faith when Gabriel visited her, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." With Mary we do not find evidence of doubting such as in the case of Zacharias, but we find a pious trusting in God and in His Word.

"And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." I am sure we understand, congregation, this believing was not Mary's doing. Here Elisabeth does not praise Mary's accomplishments, but she praises God's work that has been manifested in Mary. In faith she was enabled to trust that the Lord would accomplish that which He had promised. Blessed are those who may believe this, regardless of how impossible this may appear from a human perspective.

Thus we are richly instructed also in this portion of Scripture. If there is one place in the Bible that clearly describes the exercise of true faith, then it certainly is this account of Mary. Her faith is not tentative. She does not seek to first understand only to subsequently believe. No, not at all. Through the work of the Holy Spirit her faith rests entirely on the Word of an almighty and truthful God. Mary receives the Word of the Lord on no other ground than this: The Lord Himself speaks and through the Holy Spirit He testifies in her heart regarding the truth of His Word.

Thus we find here a very rich instruction for those who seek the application of salvation for themselves, those who crave and long for reconciliation and peace with God, but who wonder, "How do I obtain a portion of this? How do I come to the assurance that the Lord Jesus came in the flesh for me also?" Well, it is only through faith that the Lord gives this knowledge and assurance. There is no other way. It is in the way of faith that the Lord communicates His grace to the soul.

Those who have come to know themselves through the discovering light of the Holy Spirit, and have had to reckon with their sins, their sinful existence, and their continued transgressing in the face of a righteous God, hardly dare to believe that the Lord would extend His mercy to them and grant them His grace. They believe it is possible for others, but not for them.

And yet, it is precisely those who judge themselves to be unworthy of anything, those that genuinely miss the communion with God, those who cannot pay the penalty for the

sins they have committed and cannot heal the breach that they have wrought between God and their souls; it is for them that Christ, as God's great gift, came in the flesh to reconcile them with God. In Him the Lord extends His arm to them saying, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Oh, congregation, beg the Lord for that light, and for that work of the Holy Spirit who works true faith. Then you will stop reasoning within yourself, "If only I was more like this or that." Then you will cease your efforts to render yourself acceptable before the Lord Jesus. On the contrary, you will then learn to confess your absolute unworthiness before God. Then you will endorse God's judgment regarding your sins. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit leads such lost, unworthy sinners in themselves to that mystery of salvation; that Jesus Christ came into this world to seek and to save that which was lost. He teaches them to trust on these words that are proclaimed at Christmas, "Good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

Oh, congregation, those who have come to trust in God's Word in this way are given to embrace the salvation that has been revealed by Him. They shall say with Elisabeth, "And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" "Lord, how is it possible that Thou would take heed of such a lost and sinful one as I am?" However, they will also sing with Mary, "Our souls shall magnify the Lord; in God the Saviour we rejoice."

Then it becomes real, also for you. "Blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." Amen.

Closing Psalter 362:1-3

Verse 1

*From out the depths I cry, O Lord, to Thee;
Lord, hear my call;
I love Thee, Lord, for Thou dost heed my plea,
Forgiving all;
If Thou shouldst mark our sins, who then could stand?
But grace and mercy dwell at Thy right hand.*

Verse 2

*I wait for God, the Lord, and on His word
My hope relies;
My soul still waits and looks unto the Lord
Till light arise;*

*I look for Him to drive away my night,
Yea, more than watchmen look for morning light.*

Verse 3

*Hope in the Lord, ye waiting saints, and He
Will well provide,
For mercy and redemption full and free
With Him abide;
From sin and evil, mighty thou they seem,
His arm almighty will His saints redeem.*