

20 December 2009
Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“God’s Mercy in the Flesh”

Text: Luke 1:39-56 (Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are many, many things associated with Christmas, and the Christmas story is filled with many dearly loved and well-known events: the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary; Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth; the journey of the family to Bethlehem; the birth of Jesus and the manger; the shepherds; the star and the wise men. But today, we hear of another thing that God wants associated with the Christmas story: *His mercy*. For in Mary’s song, called the Magnificat, we heard these words in response to the events that were happening: **“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”** His mercy. Not for some, but for all. From generation to generation, down through the ages. From the beginning of time to the end of time, our God is a merciful God.

For in the beginning, in mercy, God created the heavens and the earth.
In mercy, He carefully planned creation and gave it to our first parents.
In mercy, He then came to them after they fell into sin and death.
In mercy, He promised to rescue them and send a Saviour.
And then His mercy continued.

In mercy, He saved Noah and his family through the flood.
In mercy, He called Abraham and made him the father of many nations.
In mercy, He stayed Abraham’s hand as it held the knife above his son.
In mercy, He rescued His people from Egypt.
In mercy, He brought them through the Red Sea and kept them in the wilderness.
In mercy, He settled them into their Promised Land.
But His mercy was not done.

In mercy, He gave His people the Tabernacle and the Temple, that He might dwell with them.
In mercy, He sent prophets to call His people to repentance.
In mercy, He fought for them against their enemies.
In mercy, He let them be defeated by their enemies when they turned from Him, and in mercy, He restored them when they repented.
In His mercy He was always working, for them, in them, and through them.

And all this, and much more, because the apex of His mercy was coming. When, in mercy, He sent the angel Gabriel to a young virgin in Nazareth named Mary, and through His Word and Spirit, His Son, the Saviour of the world, was conceived in her. This was the apex of His mercy, because all God's mercy finds in its heart, its center, its meaning, in Jesus. All God's mercy flows to Jesus and from Jesus. God's mercy is never an arbitrary, disconnected, free-floating thing - it is always His mercy for us in Jesus. For His mercy is not just to do for us a thing here or a thing there, a favor here or a favor there - but to do for us what we need the most: *save us from our sin*. For that is our greatest need.

Because of sin we have a present but no future.

Because of sin, we have life that leads to death.

Because of sin, we deserve nothing good from God, only His wrath, displeasure, and condemnation.

And so though you may be something or someone in the eyes of the world, we are all beggars before God.

But dear Christian, that is a *good* thing, for then Christmas is for you; the Son of God is for you; His forgiveness is for you; His mercy is for you.

If you do not see yourself as a beggar, then you cry out not for mercy, but for what you deserve, what you have earned; you cry out for your rights and for respect.

But beggars do no such thing.

Beggars simply cry out from their nothingness: *Lord, have mercy*.

And our Lord has mercy.

The mercy we see in the manger.

The mercy we see in the Jordan.

The mercy we see on the cross.

For in those places we see the Son of God for us, having mercy. The Son of God joining Himself to us, taking our sin, and providing for us the gift of forgiveness and life. For always our Lord is merciful. From generation to generation, down through the ages. From the beginning of time to the end of time.

The problem is that we don't always believe that.

When problems and difficulties arise in our lives,

when hurts and pains seem to overwhelm,

when it seems as if help is so very far away and there is no hope,

we think God is not saving us, but punishing us, hurting us,

withholding from us, turning away from us.

That God is not for me at all.

But it is not so. It is true, as Mary spoke, that God "***scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones . . . and the rich he has sent away empty.***" And maybe He has done these things to you - scattered you, brought you down, emptied you. But why?

Because He is merciful. So that of humble estate, He may exalt you - not with a worldly exaltation, but with a true and everlasting exaltation.
That hungry, He may fill you with good things - not with the things of this world that we think we want, but with His truly good things.
And that a poor beggar, you come to His table - a table set for beggars.
For all is done in mercy, to have mercy.
That He not just be a God, but *your* God, *your* Saviour.

That is what Mary believed, and relied on, because God showing mercy in this way was going to mean much difficulty for her! But as Elizabeth said, ***“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”***

And blessed are you too, who believe what is spoken to you from the Lord.
Who believe not what you know in your mind or feel in your heart, but who believe the Word of the Lord.
Who trust not in what is seen, but what is unseen.
Who rely not on yourself and what you can do, but on the mercy of the Lord.
The mercy of the Lord who chose too little Bethlehem for the birthplace of his Son,
 who chose too old Elizabeth to bear His forerunner,
 who chose a lowly virgin to provide the human nature of his Son,
 and who has now chosen you to be His son, His daughter.
To come to you and dwell in you, that you may dwell in Him.

And so for you, in mercy, the Son of God comes in the flesh.
For you, in mercy, He lives and does the will of His Father perfectly.
For you, in mercy, He offers up His flesh and blood on the cross as the sacrifice for your sin.
And now for you He comes, in mercy,
 to give His body and blood into your mouth for the forgiveness of your sin;
 to give you His Spirit to sanctify you;
 to give you faith to trust in Him.

That you too may magnify the Lord, and leap in the womb of your mother, the Church.
For as only beggars cry out to God for mercy, so too only beggars praise God for his mercy.
His mercy, which isn't always easy, but always good.
His mercy, which is His never-dying commitment to you.
His mercy, which provides for all your needs and especially your greatest need.
His mercy, which gives freely, with no merit or worthiness in you.

And so again this Advent season, His greeting has reached your ears and brought you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people - that unto you God is

merciful. For unto you is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord. Or as Mary went on to say, ***“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*** For God does not forget His promises or His people. He does not forget you. He remembers His baptismal promise to you, and helps you, His servant, in remembrance of His mercy.

That’s what Christmas is about, for that’s what Jesus is about.
The mercy of God in the flesh.
The mercy of God, for you.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.