

The Visitation: July 2, 2017
“Of All Things Great and Small”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in the church year we celebrate the Visitation. It is a festival that has been celebrated since the late 1200s, and it is a day in which we observe Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. It is on this day we read and celebrate the Magnificat, one of our beloved canticles, as we sang one version of it for our sermon hymn. To be sure, this day is not a day to glorify Mary, it is rather a day to honor her Son. This day is about Jesus. As you read the Visitation from Luke, as Mary journey’s to the hill country of Judah, it should immediately recall to your mind the Ark of Covenant as it moved to the same place. Not only do both “arise and make a journey,” they are both greeted with shouts, they both are sources of blessing for the house they enter, and they both remain for three months. As the Ark served as a portable and temporary vessel housing the immanent presence of the One True God, so also Mary serves as a temporary home for the Lord of Lord’s in the flesh. Making His home in the womb of the blessed virgin for nine months.

It is here where a strange thought occurs; a laughable retort by scoffers and a teachable moment for pastors. In seemingly impossible situations, when the promise of God’s good seems to be distant and you question God’s presence, we can be told, “Your God is too small.”

There comes a time in everyone’s life, perhaps several, where we question God’s gracious hand for us in our lives, and our God really is too small if we think He is not present and not at work accomplishing good according to His purpose. The true vastness of God is overwhelming to contemplate. He is God. He is Creator. He is omnipresent and omniscient. His thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts.¹ Our God is so vast and immense that heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Him.²

That is why it is very difficult to imagine there was a time when God was really small. It is hard to picture God, as an embryo, a baby growing in the womb of Mary. At the time Mary visits Elizabeth, Jesus would have been just a tiny “brephos,” the Greek word for babies both before and after birth. An unborn human child is fully a human person, with the full dignity of man given to it. Upon the Angel declaring the Word to Mary that she was pregnant with the Son of God, Mary left with haste to the house of Elizabeth. A trip that would have taken 6-7 days, so Jesus was little. In the growth stage of a baby in the womb, God, who cannot be contained by the highest heaven is not only contained in a womb; He could have sat comfortably on the sharp

¹ Isaiah 55:8–9

² 1 Kings 8:27

point of a pin with room to spare. As we sing the Advent Hymn, Savior of the Nations Come, “Not by human flesh and blood, By the Spirit of our God, Was the Word of God made flesh— Woman’s offspring, pure and fresh.”³ Pure and fresh indeed!

Why? Why would God become so small? Why would He limit Himself, restrict Himself, lower Himself? Psalm 51 helps us understand, “***I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.***”⁴ God had to become so small because our sinfulness started when we were so small. From the moment of conception, the time we come into being, we bear sin. I’m not talking about doing sin. Embryos cannot tell lies, cheat, disobey, curse, harm, or steal; they do, however bear original sin: the sin we are because we are human. We are sinful from the moment of conception because we are human from the moment of conception.

The event of Mary coming to visit Elizabeth reminds us of the serious desperation of our human condition. Many easily take this condition lightly. Many say, “Fine. Okay, we’re poor miserable sinners. Now let’s hear God’s forgiveness and get on with things.” The Visitation reminds us that our sinfulness is part of our essence. “Rotten to the core” is not just a euphemism to depict our sinful condition; it’s a reality that describes the very essence of our being.

It is easily overlooked, and hard to hear. God explained that rottenness very early in Genesis. In chapter 6, God sees that a worldwide flood is going to be necessary when He looks down upon humanity and sees that “***wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.***”⁵ Paul bemoans that rottenness when he cries out, “***For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.***”⁶

It stands to reason then, as nothing good is there, nothing good can come from there. In fact Jesus said, “***From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.***”⁷

This is the terrible effect of sin. We are sinners. On our own, we cannot do anything to change it. We cannot change our sinful nature any more than we can change the color of our eyes. I can cover them with colored lenses to give a different appearance, but it doesn’t change the eye itself. It is woven into who we are. Sin corrupts us from the time God, “***Formed my inward parts,***” and, “***Knitted me together in my mother’s womb.***”⁸

³ LSB 332 Savior of the Nations Come: stanza 2

⁴ Psalm 51:5

⁵ Genesis 6:5

⁶ Romans 7:18

⁷ Mark 7:21–23

⁸ Psalm 139:13

It was for this reason Jesus came into this world in the way He did. God, had to become true man, and one who began where we all begin. He went through every human stage of development, though without sin. He started as a tiny embryo in the womb. As were we, so was Jesus, “*fearfully and wonderfully made.*”⁹ He came to save us from the curse of the first Adam. He came to rescue us in our sin. As the “*First man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*”¹⁰ Yes, there was a time when God was small, but his greatness never diminished. “Here a maid was found with child, Yet remained a virgin mild. In her womb this truth was shown: God was there upon His throne.”¹¹ God enthroned in a uterine wall.

As God sat enthroned in this fleshly womb, the Holy Spirit was at work. He enabled Elizabeth to recognize this tiny embryo as her Lord and her God.¹² He enabled six-month-old in-utero John the Baptist to leap for joy in Elizabeth’s womb.¹³ It is not Mary they are reacting to. They are responding to being in the very presence of their God and Savior.

A God who would become so small reveals a love for those who are so small. It reveals a love for you and me in our smallness, in our sinfulness. It reveals a love for every human being, every embryo. That is those in the womb, as well as those in petri dishes or frozen in fertility clinics. How can we not love them, speak up for them, defend them, protect them? God, enthroned as an embryo in a womb, identifies with all embryos as His creation, and those whom He loves. Thus when we think, speak, and pray life issues, we include all human life.

There was a time when God was small, but not His greatness. God, like us, developed in the womb, taking on human flesh. It was necessary for our redemption. He needed hands and feet to be nailed on a cross. He needed blood that could be shed. He needed a back to feel the scourge and a brow to be pierced with thorns. He needed a heart to be broken in forsakenness and a soul to bear the forsakenness of hell. He needed lungs so he could breathe His last. He needed a body so He could die and be buried in a tomb. And everything He did from womb to cross to tomb He did for you, and for me. His suffering and death was all we deserved because of our sin, and yet, He paid it all.

There was a time when God was small, but not His greatness. The body that was enthroned and developed in Mary’s womb, enthroned and crushed for us on a cross, enthroned in death and laid in a tomb, is now a resurrected body enthroned in heaven at the right hand of God. From

⁹ Psalm 139:14

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:45

¹¹ LSB 332 Savior of the Nations Come: stanza 3

¹² Luke 1:43

¹³ Luke 1:44

there He sends His Holy Spirit, who gives us eyes of faith as He did Elizabeth, and leaping joy as He did baby John.

His Spirit enables us to recognize that God still comes to us, still visits us in things that are small. There is your God in a handful of baptismal water—visiting you, cleansing you, giving you a new nature to battle against the sinful one, covering you with His holiness, so that even as the battle rages, God sees you as pure. There is your God in an ounce of wine and a flake of bread—visiting you, cleansing you, restoring your new nature, assuring you of the forgiveness of your sins and life everlasting. There is your God in eleven-point font forming words on a printed page and spoken into your ears—visiting you, strengthening your faith, assuring you of His love, and pointing you to promise after promise after promise for now and for eternity.

“Your God is too small” maybe isn’t the best message to share when we question God’s presence in seemingly impossible situations. Maybe the greatness and power of God is not always the best message for those dealing with devastating circumstances or difficult situations. The Visitation—Elizabeth and John rejoicing in the visit of their unborn Savior—gives us a better message. There was a time when God was small. And in that smallness—not in the absence of any troubles or suffering we might face—we see His great love. That’s where Jesus is waiting for us. He will not abandon us along the way! He is present. He is at work. He is here. Of this you are assured because of the greatness of God’s love demonstrated when God was so small. With Mary we sing, “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*”¹⁴ Amen.

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

¹⁴ Luke 1:46–47