



# Mothers and Sons

## Luke 1:39-48, 56

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, <sup>40</sup>and she entered the house

**H**ail, thou that art the throne of the King:

Hail, thou who dost hold Him who holdeth all.

Hail, thou through whom the creation is made new:

Hail, thou through whom the Creator becomes a newborn child.

—Byzantine Hymn

of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

<sup>41</sup>And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup>And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is

she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” <sup>46</sup>And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup>for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. . . .”

<sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.

Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were an elderly and deeply religious Jewish couple. Some months before the incident in our reading, an angel had very unexpectedly announced to Zechariah that Elizabeth, who had never borne a child, was going to be a mother. The boy she would bear, the angel declared, would be “great before the Lord” (Luke 1:15)—a messenger sent by God to urge people to turn back to him.

A few months later, the same angel, Gabriel, appeared to a very young Jewish woman named Mary. Gabriel told Mary that she would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, without sexual relations with a man. Her child would be “great” indeed, for he would be the Son of God. Mary responded that she was willing to cooperate with this unusual divine plan: “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

During their conversation, the angel informed Mary that Elizabeth—who was a relative of hers—had become pregnant. As soon as the angel departed, Mary set out to visit Elizabeth. As our reading begins, Mary is arriving at Elizabeth’s house.

We may suppose that Mary gives Elizabeth a customary greeting—something like “Hello, Auntie Elizabeth.” But her greeting elicits a surprising response. Elizabeth’s child jumps in her womb, and Elizabeth bursts out in a loud cry. “Blessed are you among women!” she yells out to her undoubtedly astonished visitor.

This flurry of activity reflects the presence of the Holy Spirit, who has instantaneously given Elizabeth an insight into the identity of the child Mary is carrying: he is the Lord! In a rush of words inspired by the Spirit, Elizabeth rejoices, proclaims what is happening, describes her experience of inspiration, and offers Mary encouragement. A medieval English monk named Bede wrote that Elizabeth “couldn’t praise the Lord with a moderate voice. Being

filled with the Holy Spirit, she was on fire. She rejoiced that the Lord had come!”

Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting with her ears; she feels the baby kicking in her womb; she grasps the meaning of Mary’s visit with her mind; she shouts with a loud voice. Her whole self senses the Spirit’s action and responds.

“Blessed are you among women,” Elizabeth cries out to Mary (Luke 1:42)—meaning that Mary is the most blessed woman there is. God has given her the supreme blessing of becoming the mother of his Son.

And, Elizabeth adds, Mary is blessed for believing that God will do what he said he would do (see Luke 1:45). Elizabeth is congratulating Mary: “You’re on the right track! Keep on trusting God!” We don’t know whether

Mary is feeling a need for encouragement, but Elizabeth hasn’t waited to find out. She offers encouragement freely. Filled with the Spirit, she can’t help but express her confidence in God.

At the same time, Elizabeth recognizes her unworthiness to receive a visit from the Lord and his mother. “How does such a thing happen, that my Lord’s mother has come to me?” In Elizabeth’s humility, too, we can detect the presence of the Spirit.

Amazingly, Elizabeth’s son, who will be named John, is also caught up in the action of the Spirit. The tiny child *in utero* is rambunctious with joy. He brings to mind a statement that Jesus will later make: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not

Here we discover an important aspect of the Spirit’s work. No situation is too small or too ordinary for him.

enter it” (Luke 18:17). Little John gives us a picture of the simple, childlike reception the Spirit seeks from us.

Luke does not say so, but it goes without saying that Mary also is filled with the Spirit as she prays (sings?) a declaration of God’s greatness. Her prayer expresses a deep understanding of God’s mercy, faithfulness, and concern for justice. (Read her entire prayer in Luke 1:46-55.)

Fortunately for us, this episode is not just a long-ago event. The Spirit who filled Mary, Elizabeth, and little John, and then guided the gospel writer Luke, is with us, too. If we read Luke’s Spirit-filled account with humility and openness to God’s action—the kind of humility and openness we witness in Mary and Elizabeth—the Spirit will bring us into contact with this event and with Jesus, the hidden center of it. The Spirit urges us to share Mary’s confidence that God will fulfill his words to us—his promises of forgiveness, strength, transformation, and eternal life. The Spirit invites us to enter into Elizabeth’s whole-self response to Jesus’ coming, and even into John’s exuberance.

How does Jesus come to us today? The ways are many. He comes in Scripture and in the sacraments, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist and in holy Communion. He comes to us in unexpected inspirations of the Spirit. He comes to us, as he came to Elizabeth, in his mother, who continues to play a vital role in the Church as mother of the Lord and our mother, too.

If anyone had been searching for God’s activity in the world on the day Mary arrived at Elizabeth’s house, I doubt that they would have looked there. In those days, men were almost exclusively responsible for public affairs. Why would anyone pay attention to the talk of two women? And wouldn’t God be more likely to make himself known in public, in the Temple in Jerusalem, than in a private home? To an outside observer, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth might seem insignificant.

Yet here we discover an important aspect of the Spirit’s work. No situation is too small or too ordinary for him. The Spirit of God is present with us in the everyday. A Byzantine hymn joyfully declares to him: “You are everywhere present and fill all things!”

## Understand!

1. Why do you think Mary went to visit Elizabeth? Why did she stay on for three months? What effect do you think her visit might have had on Elizabeth? On Zechariah? On Mary herself?

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2. Elizabeth (Luke 1:43) and Mary (1:46) make humble responses to God’s action. What is humility? Why is it important in responding to the Holy Spirit?

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3. Mary “magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46), that is, she declares the Lord’s greatness. What does it mean to declare God’s greatness? Why should we declare God’s greatness?

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4. Luke tells us how Elizabeth experienced Mary, not how Mary experienced Elizabeth. What do you think Mary’s thoughts might have been in her encounter with Elizabeth?

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5. What insight does this story give us into children in the womb?

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## ► In the Spotlight Mary Stayed On

*Why did Mary remain with Elizabeth for three months? An early Christian scholar named Origen (c. 185–c. 254) suggested that the answer had to do with Elizabeth’s son, the future St. John the Baptist. Origen wrote:*

From Mary’s merely coming to Elizabeth and greeting her, “the infant leaped with joy” and “Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, prophesied.” If, in a single hour, John experienced such development, it is left to us to deduce how much he advanced during Mary’s three-month stay with Elizabeth. If the infant jumped with joy and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit in a single minute, it is inconceivable that they would make no further progress by living in the presence of the mother of the Lord and of the savior himself for three months. Rather, during those three months, while John was still in his mother’s womb, he was trained—we might even say, he was anointed like a wrestler in the arena—in preparation for the spiritual combat that lay ahead.

—Origen, *Homilies on St. Luke*

## Grow!

1. Mary believed that God would fulfill his word to her (Luke 1:45). In what situation in your life do you find it difficult to trust in God’s faithfulness to you? What steps could you take to grow in trust in God in that situation?

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2. Do you, like Elizabeth, overflow with confidence in God (Luke 1:45)? Do you encourage others to have faith in God? Do you ask the Holy Spirit to make you an agent of his encouragement to others? Pick out someone you know to whom you could offer encouragement. How will you encourage them?

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3. The Spirit gave Elizabeth a sudden awareness of God's action. Have you ever experienced this kind of grace? (Possible examples: Recognizing that a difficult situation is a trial allowed by God for a purpose. Seeing another person as loved by God. Feeling assured that a situation is in God's care.) How could you become more open to the Spirit's inspirations?

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4. When you hear other people's good news or descriptions of their experiences of God, do you respond, like Elizabeth, with joy? Or is your response tinged with envy? What's wrong with envy? How could you become more like Elizabeth?

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5. How is praise a declaration of God's greatness? How often do you praise God in prayer? In a liturgical setting? What difference does it make when you do so?

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### ► In the Spotlight A Little One's Relationship with God

John exults . . . before he is born. Before his eyes can see what the world looks like, he can recognize the Lord of the world with his spirit. In this regard, I think that the prophetic phrase is appropriate: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,"

and before you came forth from the womb I sanctified you”  
(Jeremiah 1:5).

—Maximus of Turin

## Reflect!

1. Picture the setting of our reading and replay the event in your mind. Be quiet for a time. What strikes you most forcefully in this incident? If something occurs to you, express your thought to God. But remember, the most important thing is to be present and attentive at the scene. Here are some aids for imagination and reflection:

—Reread the passage slowly more than once; try reading it aloud.

—Look at an icon of the Visitation.

—Meditate on the scene before the Blessed Sacrament.

—Pray a decade of the rosary on the Visitation.

—Repeat Elizabeth’s words in Luke 1:43-44 over and over.

2. Read and reflect on the following passages to enrich your understanding of our reading:

Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, fear not;

say to the cities of Judah,

“Behold your God!”

Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd,

he will gather the lambs in his arms,

he will gather them in his bosom,

and gently lead those that are with young.”

—Isaiah 40:9-11

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

—Luke 18:15-17

3. Compare the disciples’ exuberance in response to the Spirit in our reading with that of baby John’s:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at the sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? . . . ”

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. . . .’”

—Acts 2:1-8, 12-17

## ► In the Spotlight A Personal Pentecost

During Pentecost Mass in 1623, Louise de Marillac experienced an outpouring of grace that ended a period of anguish and made her vividly aware of the Spirit’s power and action. From then on, says her biographer J. Calvert, she was a “disciple of the Holy Spirit” and turned to him “as toward that love which would make her worthy of the Father by making her more like the Son. Said Louise: The Holy Spirit ‘fills us with pure love of God. . . . The Spirit makes us obedient to God, so that we may share the divine life.’”

St. Louise marked this anniversary for the rest of her life with a yearly Ascension-to-Pentecost retreat, prayerfully preparing to welcome more of the Spirit of love into her life.

## Act!

1. Ask to experience the Holy Spirit in a deeper way. Ask him to show you one way that he is already at work in your life and is at work in the life of someone around you.
2. Ask the Spirit for the wisdom to see how to cooperate with what he is doing.
3. Cooperate!

## ► In the Spotlight Sources of a Familiar Prayer

The first line of the Hail Mary comes from the gospel episode in which the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to be the mother of the Lord: “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28, NAB). From our reading in this session come the next words of the prayer: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (1:42). With these words, Elizabeth celebrates God’s grace in Mary’s life—and that is what we do when we use Elizabeth’s words in the Hail Mary.

To remember God’s graciousness to Mary is to remind ourselves that *our* lives also are a grace, a marvelous gift of God, and that God’s grace—the power of the Holy Spirit—is offered to us at every minute.

If, by praying the Hail Mary, we join Elizabeth in congratulating Mary for being so highly graced by God, we should also take Mary as our model for believing that God will accomplish everything that he promises us.

At Mary’s visit, Elizabeth cried out in the Spirit, recognizing the child as the incarnate Lord. When we pray the Hail Mary, the Spirit guides us to reflect on the incarnation of the Son of God. In acclaiming his mother, we thank Jesus for becoming