

CALL ME BLESSED!

Do you ever have a GREAT day, a day when the sun is shining, the temperature is just right, you feel FABULOUS, EVERYTHING is going your WAY, and you JUST feel like singing: *Oh, what a beautiful morning! Oh, what a beautiful DAY!* ? I think we ALL have those days occasionally, just NOT as often as we'd LIKE, right? Well, IN our Scripture Lesson today, MARY and ELIZABETH are BOTH having THAT kind of day! FIRST, we hear it from ELIZABETH, Mary's RELATIVE. Now, BOTH women are PREGNANT. Mary is a LITTLE pregnant, and Elizabeth is VERY pregnant. Elizabeth is OLDER than Mary, maybe an AUNT. And she's wanted CHILDREN all her LIFE, but it's NEVER happened. And THEN an angel came to her HUSBAND, Zechariah, and TOLD him that Elizabeth, in her OLD age, was going to have a BABY. And Zechariah said: *At HER age! You gotta be KIDDING!* Well, FOR his lack of FAITH, the angel struck Zechariah DUMB, which was probably a BLESSING for Elizabeth. Anyway, she IS pregnant, and now young MARY arrives on her DOORSTEP!

Well, I would EXPECT Elizabeth to talk about her OWN pregnancy, wouldn't YOU? After all, MARY is YOUNG. But ELIZABETH is PAST child-bearing years, so SHE has experienced a MIRACLE! ELIZABETH has been touched by an ANGEL, and her lifelong DISAPPOINTMENT has been suddenly REVERSED! SO, we'd EXPECT Elizabeth to talk about her OWN baby, and her OWN plans, and her OWN hopes and dreams! But INSTEAD, she greets Mary with THESE words: *Blessed are YOU among women, and blessed is the fruit of your WOMB. And WHY has this happened to ME: that the mother of my LORD comes to ME? For as SOON as I heard the sound of your GREETING, the child in my womb LEAPED for joy!* Can you hear the EXCITEMENT in her voice? Can you HEAR that *Oh, what a beautiful morning* JOY in her voice as she speaks! LUKE tells us that Elizabeth is FILLED with the Holy Spirit! And it's that SPIRIT that PROVOKES Elizabeth's JOYFUL response! YES, she IS happy about her OWN baby, but she's even HAPPIER about MARY'S baby, because the SPIRIT has made it CLEAR to her that MARY'S baby is HOLY! MARY'S baby is their LONG-awaited MESSIAH! MARY'S baby is *God-WITH-us*, Emmanuel!

And THEN, we have MARY'S joyful response. Listen to MARY'S words: *My soul MAGNIFIES the Lord, and my spirit REJOICES in God my Savior, for He has looked with FAVOR on the lowliness of His servant! SURELY, from now on, ALL generations will call me BLESSED; for the MIGHTY One has done GREAT things for ME, and HOLY is His name.* WOW! What a story THIS is! ELIZABETH is excited! MARY is excited! And when I read it, I get excited! WHY? Because it's a story about God REACHING out and TOUCHING the lives of TWO very ORDINARY women -- and BLESSING them -- and THROUGH them, blessing the WORLD! Can you FEEL their JOY about their babies? Can you FEEL their JOY about being PART of God's PLAN? Can you FEEL their WONDER at having GOD touch their LIVES in this SPECIAL way? They can hardly BELIEVE it! BUT, the POINT is that they DO believe! And therefore, they CANNOT contain themselves! Their HAPPINESS just BUBBLES off the page and makes US happy too!

BUT, do you know what ELSE? When I read this story, I get excited for MYSELF as well! And I ALSO get excited for YOU! LET me tell you WHY. I get excited for US because the stories of Elizabeth and Mary SHOW us what can HAPPEN when GOD touches our lives, because God can ALSO do GREAT things IN and through MY life and YOURS!

Now, DON'T get me WRONG! There will NEVER be another mother of JOHN the Baptist or JESUS! Elizabeth and Mary are both *ONE of a KIND*! HOWEVER, God STILL touches lives and BLESSES people! God STILL chooses people THROUGH whom to BLESS this WORLD! And I believe that I am ONE of them. I believe that God has touched MY life in a particular WAY, so that I might be a BLESSING to the WORLD! But I am not UNIQUE, because God ALSO touches YOUR life in a particular way! Yes, God is trying to bless EACH of us, and make something WONDERFUL out of EACH of our lives, so that WE will be a blessing to OTHERS and to the WORLD. Now, DON'T get me wrong HERE either! I'm NOT talking about God blessing us so that we'll NEVER have another PROBLEM. The LIFE of blessing to which God CALLS us is SELDOM easy, and RARELY comfortable! Mary did NOT have her baby in a beautiful, well-lit, clean, comfortable hospital room, after all! She had her BABY in a dark, smelly STABLE, with LOTS of bacteria around! And when her child grew up, SHE had to watch Him with CONCERN and FEAR as He stirred up more and more CONFLICT and CONTROVERSY! And THEN, she had to watch Him DIE – CRUCIFIED like a common criminal! And WHAT a PAINFUL and SHAMEFUL death it WAS!

No! God does NOT necessarily call us to EASY lives. But, God DOES call us to lives that MATTER! God DOES call us to BLESSED lives! God DOES call us to lives that are worth LIVING! There's a wonderful story about the great **Albert Schweitzer**, a physician and concert organist, who in 1913, gave up a GLAMOROUS life in Paris to go to AFRICA to start a MEDICAL clinic for people who would otherwise have NO medical care. And his FIRST hospital in Africa was a converted CHICKEN coop. And an old CAMP bed was his first OPERATING table. It was anything BUT an EASY life. Well, 36 years later, in 1949, on his one of his VISITS to the U.S., a reporter ASKED him IF he had found HAPPINESS in Africa. And Schweitzer replied: *I have found a place of SERVICE, and that is ENOUGH happiness for ANYONE.* Friends: THAT is a life worth LIVING, a life of being a BLESSING to others! And Schweitzer felt BLESSED to be CHOSEN for it, just as MARY felt BLESSED to be chosen for HER wonderful, but PAINFUL calling of being the mother of JESUS.

Likewise, in Guayaquil, Ecuador, God called 6 women, high school classmates, to help GIRLS and young women living on the streets, MOST of them ABANDONED by their parents, often because they were too POOR to FEED their daughters. And these girls would have NO way to make a living, other than either begging or prostitution. SO, these 6 women started a FOUNDATION for street girls called, *Fundacion Sor Dominga Bocca*. And IN this foundation, the girls are given a HOME and FAMILY. And ROSA, the DIRECTOR, is like their MOTHER. Well, Rosa and the OTHER women feel enormously BLESSED to be CHOSEN for this MINISTRY, and she feels that God STRENGTHENS them for their WORK there. But it's NEVER easy! Well, these women are an ENORMOUS blessing to the girls. And when WE visited the foundation for the first time several years ago, we SAW what a BLESSING these women ARE, and WE felt God calling US to HELP them with their ministry. SO, through *Every Dollar Feeds Kids*, we BEGAN of providing their FOOD. And while it brings us great JOY to DO so, even THAT small ministry is NOT always EASY. We have to KEEP selling crafts, writing newsletters, and giving lots of our OWN money in order to KEEP it all GOING! But it feels TERRIFIC to know that WE are an ENORMOUS blessing for THEM!

Yes, friends: God blesses ALL of us to BE a BLESSING! GOD has ministries for EACH of us to accomplish! And HOPEFULLY, we feel BLESSED to be chosen and equipped for our various MINISTRIES. I know that God calls ME to preach this SERMON, and I feel BLESSED to be CHOSEN. Now, I can't even GUESS how this sermon, OR my MINISTRY as

a whole, will affect ANYBODY'S life, but I AM confident that God will USE it and make something IMPORTANT out of my LIFE and my WORK. And even though ONE of my ministries is HERE in this church, I ALSO have OTHER ministries. I consider my MARRIAGE to be a MINISTRY, and my PARENTING and GRANDPARENTING. SO is the way I SERVE my community. I try to live ALL of them in such a WAY that I can JOYFULLY lift them up to God and NOT be ASHAMED of ANYTHING, but feel GOOD about it! Yes, GOD has given me MANY blessings, and called me to MANY ministries. And I feel BLESSED to be SO blessed that I can BE a blessing to OTHERS and to our WORLD. And it brings me an ENORMOUS amount of JOY, just as it did MARY and Elizabeth!

Yes, friends: no matter WHO you are, or WHERE you are on life's journey, GOD has BLESSED you to BE a BLESSING to others, EVEN if you're can't get AROUND much anymore. My great grandmother, Bertha Ellis, was a great EXAMPLE. I NEVER knew her when she was NOT a shut-in, and yet, THAT woman touched MORE lives.... And she was a POOR woman, whose LIFE had been VERY difficult. She'd NEVER done anything EXTRAORDINARY, or even lived or traveled more than 30 miles from her place of BIRTH. But GOD gave her a special GIFT, and SHE felt ENORMOUSLY blessed to HAVE it. SHE, like NO one else I've EVER known, could make EVERYONE she MET feel VALUED, important, and CARED for, AS IF you were the ONLY person in the world: from the PAPERBOY to the grocery-delivery guy, from neighborhood CHILDREN to her own FAMILY. And I can only GUESS at the INCREDIBLE number of lives she TOUCHED, either DIRECTLY or INDIRECTLY during her 9-plus DECADES on this earth. And MINE was ONE of them. I would be a VERY different person if I'd NOT had HER influence on my life.

Yes, GOD has blessed ALL of us to BE a BLESSING! Now, I don't know what God has called YOU to DO with YOUR blessings. Perhaps YOU don't know either. And if you DON'T, you need to PRAY about it, and ask God to speak more CLEARLY, OR, to GIVE you EARS to LISTEN better. Maybe one day SOON, we can ALSO begin using spiritual GIFT inventories around here to HELP people discern their gifts. And maybe we can ALSO begin offering some kind of VOCATIONAL discernment. But anyway, ONCE you HEAR your CALL (whatever it IS) -- and EMBARK upon your various MINISTRIES of USING your blessings to BE a blessing to OTHERS -- even though I CANNOT guarantee you an EASY life, I CAN and WILL guarantee you a BLESSED life -- an IMPORTANT life -- a life worth LIVING -- and a deeply JOY-FILLED life, EVEN if it's not always a HAPPY life!

If you recall, LAST Sunday, we lit the ADVENT candle of JOY. And THIS is the KIND of JOY that we're TALKING about during the season of Advent. It's a DEEPER joy than what USUALLY passes for joy. AND it's a JOY like MARY'S joy and ELIZABETH'S joy! And it sings OUT in our very SOULS a SONG like MARY'S song, Mary's MAGNIFICAT: *My soul MAGNIFIES the Lord, and my spirit REJOICES in God, my Savior, for He has looked with FAVOR on the LOWLINESS of His servant. Surely, from now on, ALL generations will call me BLESSED; for the Mighty One has done great things for ME, and HOLY is His name.* So, BE the blessing that GOD had called you to BE, my friends, and USE the GIFTS God has GIVEN you. It WON'T always make you HAPPY, but it WILL bring GREAT joy, and LIFE in ALL its fullness. Amen.