

The Fulfillment

Luke 1:39-45

Russian playwright Anton Chekov is considered one of the greatest writers in the world. Because of his fame, he was sought out for advice by younger playwrights. In one letter, he describes a principle now known as Chekov's gun. "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." If a gun is placed in a scene, it must at some point be used. Putting extraneous details in a story that are never mentioned or used again create false promises. Foreshadowing should lead to fulfillment.

Throughout the Christmas story, we see that God follows that principle. We see all sorts of details from Old Testament prophecies and events in the history of the people of Israel that foreshadow the coming of Jesus at Christmas. More than that, we see the characters, Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and others, who see the promises made to them fulfilled before their eyes. It's amazing how much fulfillment happens.

The part we focus on today is known as the Visitation, and features two women at different life stages, but who are both dealing with miraculous pregnancies and promises made to them. In Mary and Elizabeth, who believed, we see, first of all, that the promises of God were indeed from God and, second, that these promises would be fulfilled.

Mary has just received a momentous announcement. The angel Gabriel has appeared to her in person and declared that she will conceive and give birth to a son — and this will happen despite the fact that she is a virgin. Her first act upon receiving this news is to believe

it, to trust that it will happen. Her next move is to go to the hill country of Judea, to a village where her cousin Elizabeth lives. Some six months earlier, Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, had received some miraculous, barely believable news of their own: despite their long years of waiting for a child, a promise that seemed like it would never be fulfilled, Elizabeth, a woman well past childbearing age, would conceive and bear a son. And it has happened: Elizabeth is pregnant with a son, who would become the last and the greatest of the prophets of Israel, fulfilling prophecies of his own as the voice in the wilderness, John the Baptist.

After Gabriel leaves Mary, we are told that she "... went with haste." She seems driven to visit her kinswoman. Mary knows of Elizabeth's pregnancy. She knows how old Elizabeth is, so she knows this pregnancy must be miraculous. What better place to go, to share the incredible news she herself has just received? What better place to go to see another of God's promises fulfilled? And, given what we know of Joseph's reaction to her miraculous news, it was probably good she got out of town for a bit.

Elizabeth has seen the fulfillment of God's promises. The angel Zechariah saw in the temple promised that they would have a child, even after their years of waiting for a child had seemed to be over. Yet here is Elizabeth, the proof of the fulfillment present in her visibly pregnant state. Mary too knows the fulfillment. Just a few short verses earlier, an angel had arrived and given her a promise. She too carried the proof of that fulfillment in her womb, though no one could see that yet.

The promises made to them before are not the only things that are fulfilled. As these two women greet one another, prophecies and promises come tumbling from their mouths. Elizabeth calls Mary blessed as the baby John leaps in her womb. If we kept reading, we'd hear Mary sing the Magnificat, where Mary will testify to how God lifted her up in her lowliness. Not despite her lowliness, mind you, but in it.

But we're reminded why Mary is blessed. She believed the promises made to her. She believed the message of the angel that she was chosen by God to be the mother of God. She believed that Elizabeth had her own miraculous pregnancy. She believed the promises of God, and had seen one fulfilled already. That gave her the strength and courage to trust in the rest of the promises of God.

From their meeting would go on more promises fulfilled. John would be born, and his father Zechariah would get his voice back, fulfilling another promise. Mary would travel back to Nazareth, and she and Joseph would travel to Bethlehem, fulfilling yet another promise. As the story goes on, more and more promises would be fulfilled. Shepherds would find things just as the angels had told them. Wise men would find the promise of the star fulfilled, in the place where the prophets pointed. Jesus would be brought to the temple, fulfilling promises made to Simeon and Anna. On and on, the promises would be fulfilled.

One of the most famous stories of World War II is the story of General Douglas MacArthur, commander of US forces in the Philippines. Forced to retreat in the face of Japanese advances, MacArthur famously vowed to return. When he kept that promise and returned with

liberating troops two years later, he said "I have returned. By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil." General MacArthur kept his promise. His promise was fulfilled. General MacArthur's return didn't end the war, though. Many more battles would have to be fought, more people killed, before the enemies would be defeated. But their efforts were the first step in what would lead to victory.

Jesus' coming that first Christmas didn't end the war, either. The baby lying in a manger is the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus was born to die for our sins, to begin God's work of fixing the world from all of the ways it's been broken by sin. His death on the cross defeated death once and for all, and saves us from our sins. But sin, death, and the devil don't realize they're defeated yet, and so we continue to struggle against them. Our war against sin, death, and the power of the devil continues. But we know that Jesus' second coming will end that war. When He comes again, He will "wipe away every tear," and there will be no more death or pain (Revelation 21:4), and everything will be fixed for good. God has promised to return, and we know God keeps His promises, and his promises will be fulfilled.

Christmas is not just the fulfillment of what we were waiting for. It is the promise that our waiting is not in vain. It's the fulfillment that shows us that all of God's other promises are worth holding onto, worth trusting.

As we wait for Christmas to come, we live in the same promises of Mary and Elizabeth. We have seen God's Word fulfilled among us, and trust that it will continue to be so. We trust that the same God who watched over Zechariah and Elizabeth in their years of waiting for a child,

who watched Mary and Joseph as they watched the fulfillment of the promises made to them, will continue to watch over us as we wait for the day when promises are fulfilled, when sin and sorrow no longer grow, when thorns no longer infest the ground, when snow and ice and cold and wind no longer harm us.

The same God who has kept his promises in the Bible is the same God who keeps his promises today. The same God promises that in spite of our failings and fallings that he will hear us and bless us and direct us and keep us as his own. Through Jesus, because Jesus died and rose just as he said he would, you have been forgiven. That's a promise that has been kept.

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