

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 1:39-45

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This story is basically an introduction to the ecstatic speech of Elizabeth to Mary. It is followed in the story by Mary's ecstatic response, the *Magnificat*. In this first part of the story the invitation is to develop Elizabeth as a character and to explore her voice. It is a story about the joy of Elizabeth when Mary comes to visit her and the unborn baby, John, moves in her womb.

This story is about two pregnant women, the first one of whom is already experiencing the movement of the child in her womb. The baby moves when Mary calls out to her. At its first level this story is one of utter delight because John the Baptist and Jesus, who were to be friends and fellow prophets, recognized each other when they were still in the womb. In this story you first introduce Mary and her journey; next you describe Elizabeth hearing Mary's greeting and the child leaping in her womb (an indirect discourse in the third person); then you tell about Elizabeth describing this in the first person. The climax of all this is the verbal thread that is woven through the whole episode: "the child leaped in her womb."

In performing Elizabeth's speech, her voice is loud. Luke makes that clear: "she exclaimed with a loud cry." It is an expression of sheer joy and it is the extension of that joy as a blessing of Mary and of her child with which Elizabeth concludes her little speech to Mary. The reference to "the mother of my Lord" is interesting. Is "my Lord" Jesus? Is she identifying the Lord as Jesus, the "mother of my Lord comes to me" or is she referring here to God? The mother reference is clearly at the first level a reference to Jesus. But this is also the source of the term *Theotokos*, the mother of God. There's a sense in which this phrase also means the mother of God. That is, "my Lord" is both Jesus and the Father God. This may be the first Trinitarian reference in the whole of the gospel tradition. Elizabeth's statement of what was spoken to Mary by the Lord reinforces this rich ambiguity.

So what was the fulfillment of what was spoken to Mary? What was spoken refers to the unbelievable words of the angel Gabriel that she would have a child without having had sexual intercourse. The fulfillment is her pregnancy. I suggest that you compare this story with the stories of other virgin births in the ancient world. There are two that were widely circulated: the stories of Alexander and Augustus Caesar, both of whom were great generals and emperors of the world of their time. This is a much better story than either of those. The characters of the women are much more fully developed and are much more human and spontaneous. Those stories are available in *The Sourcebook of the Gospels* or Alexander's birth story is outlined at [http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander\\_t32.html](http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_t32.html).

The story of Mary's visit with Elizabeth is another dimension of the good news of the Gospel and of the anticipation of the new time that John the Baptist and Jesus will initiate.