

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Our Gospel takes place right after Mary, the blessed Mother of our Lord, had been visited by the angel Gabriel and had been told the surprising yet awesome news: Mary, a maid betrothed to Joseph but before they had come together as husband and wife ... Mary, a pious maid from Nazareth, was told that she was favored to conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to a son, "*the Son of the Most High*" God (Luke 1:32), who would also be King over Israel, sitting on the throne of His father David, a kingdom without end, as David had been promised long ago (2 Sam. 7:12-16). Call Him Jesus, the angel told her, even as an angel would tell Joseph, for this son was going to "*save his people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21).

Now, as soon as the angel departed from her, Mary arose and traveled to her relative Elizabeth's home in a town in Judah. Elizabeth, you'll recall, was herself pregnant with her miracle baby John, the one who was "*to make ready for the Lord a people prepared*" (Luke 1:17); she was six months farther along than Mary.

And this is where more marvelous things happen. As soon as Mary greeted her, Elizabeth's infant son John leaped in her womb. But this was no ordinary kick in the side that babies like to inflict upon their unsuspecting mothers. That's not how Elizabeth described this leap. No, John "*leaped for joy*" at this meeting of Mary carrying the infant Jesus.

John's reaction was a true "leap of faith" — yes, little ones can believe as Jesus tells us (Matt. 18:6). Christian faith is not the doubt-filled leap that a popular Christmas movie defines as: "believing in things when common sense tells you not to" (Miracle on 34th Street). Christian faith is the Holy-Spirit-generated belief in Jesus as your Savior when one encounters the Word of God, for "God grants His Spirit or grace to no one except through or with the preceding outward Word" (Luther, Smalcald Articles, 3<sup>rd</sup> Part, Article VIII:3). For us, that encounter is through the word preached and read; John's encounter with the Word happened when he and his mother heard the voice of the Blessed Virgin mother Mary, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. And with Luther we confess: "John the Baptist ... did [not] leap in his mother's womb without Mary's voice [Luke 1: ... 41]" (SA, 3<sup>rd</sup> Part, VIII:12).

Elizabeth's reaction was also one inspired by the Holy Spirit, also one of faith. Filled with the Spirit she cried out with a loud cry, and praised what Mary had not even been able yet to disclose, that Mary was "*the mother of [Elizabeth's] Lord,*" and that Mary's miracle baby was conceived in part because she "*believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*" And filled with the Spirit, Elizabeth praised both the virgin mother and Jesus, "*the fruit of [her] womb.*"

Moreover, with this blessing upon Mary and her Spirit-conceived Son, and by Elizabeth's words, kindled by the Holy Spirit, Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit

herself, and she proceeded to sing her great song of praise to the Lord. We call it the Magnificat — “my soul magnifies the Lord.” We’ve been singing it in our Evening Prayers throughout Advent.

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”* Mary acknowledged that she had no power to redeem or save. She did then, as we do now, ... she looked to God her Savior, that is, to Him whom she was carrying in her womb. His name revealed His purpose. He would be born to save. This child was mighty God, born to scatter the proud and bring down the mighty, while exalting the humble. He was born to fill the hungry, but send the rich away empty.

Mary didn't know yet how it would happen, but surely her soul would be pierced by the brutal death of her son (Luke 2:35). Her Son would do His Father's will, not Joseph's but the Father in heaven's. Jesus would offer up His own life unto death, a lamb without blemish or spot offered up once for all on a cross, for which we now, filled with the Holy Spirit, like John, leap for joy, and with Mary, our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in our Savior. Our sins are forgiven by Jesus' blood. We are redeemed and set free. Everlasting life awaits us. Thanks be to God.

Yet, how surprising that we take such comfort in salvation coming to us in such weakness, in a little baby boy, likely less than a speck in His mother's womb, preceded by another baby boy, a bit bigger, big enough to give his mother a kick in the side. Yet we do, and we rejoice that their mothers were able to carry them to birth and be with them as they grew and matured.

You might remember a few weeks back we prayed for a husband and wife who had lost their child in the womb. Their child was a bit older than the Jesus in Mary's womb in today's Gospel, but still small when he died. The parents found the little child amidst the tissue expelled from the mother's womb, a baby so small as to fit inside the mother's wedding ring. But the S.L.E.D. test that I've written about in the Voice applies: neither size nor level of development, nor environment, nor degree of dependency changes who they are ... a child of God for whom Jesus came and died, this one being formed and knit together in his mother's womb (Ps. 139:13).

Mothers and fathers grieve the loss of such children; this mother and father grieved. As I ministered to them, I used the example of Jesus coming as a lowly babe to emphasize the enormity of what God did for us. The God who came into our flesh as a baby boy will not forget their baby boy whom we laid in the ground — Zachariah Raymond. He will be remembered even as His name Zachariah reminds us: the Lord remembers.

John, too, is a comfort for mothers and fathers who faithfully come to the Divine Service to hear the word, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and to pray for their child,

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but then who lose their child in tragic death or miscarriage. The Holy Spirit has been working on their child, giving birth to faith, nurturing and strengthening faith, even from the womb, even as the enwombed John leaped for joy in faith in Jesus. God does great things for us.

And remember, the child's value does not come from his or her being wanted by the mother or father. The child's value comes from God; children are a gift from God and a blessing, as the Psalmist says: "*a heritage,*" "*the fruit of the womb a reward*" (Ps. 127:3).

Therefore, we continue to give thanks to God for these little gifts, and we continue to pray for them, especially now as we think on our Savior come in the same perilous weakness, as we think of our salvation come as the blessed fruit of Mary's womb.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.