

When Christmas arrives, it is understandable that children may leap for joy. They may not leap, or not as high anyway, if they open a pair of socks. But if it's a gift they are really wanting, get ready for the leaping to begin.

Is this not why John is leaping within his mother's womb? Christmas had come. It arrived within the womb of the Virgin Mary. This wasn't a pair of socks. It's the gift he was waiting for: the baby Jesus.

But this gift is unopened. The baby Jesus is still wrapped up within the womb of Mary. John cannot see the gift. He cannot shake it. He is in his own mother's womb. So why does he leap for joy? Because Mary greets Elizabeth. That's right. Mary speaks to his mother. It isn't Jesus who speaks. After just six or seven days in Mary's womb, His mouth is not even formed yet. It is Mary who speaks. And as soon as the sound reaches his mother's ears, John starts leaping, and dancing, and clicking his heels like no baby had ever done before.

Mary is here today. She was, at that time, the Christ-bearer, the one who carried Jesus within her. This same Jesus is here with you, and for you, today, being carried to you by the Mary's, the Christ-bearers in your midst. Holy Baptism is a Christ-bearer, for it carries Jesus to you. Holy Communion, a Christ-bearer. The words here in the Divine Service that come into your ears, a bearer of Christ, just like Mary's words that came to the ears of Elizabeth.

Do you mothers realize that when you are with child, and you sit here in the pew during the Divine Service, when the sound of the one who carries Jesus to you reaches your ears, that baby in you leaps for joy? The Holy Spirit revealed this to Elizabeth. That movement in her womb was not the baby kicking because he was restless. He was leaping for joy at the sound of Mary's voice.

Now, he was a special baby. He was born to be the prophet of the Most High, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. Yet, the Holy Spirit is active wherever Christ is being carried. This is why we have hope when, sadly, a baby dies before birth. For although Holy Baptism did not carry Christ to that baby, the words in the Divine Service did. If you have ever lost a baby before the child was born, you can have comfort, hope, and joy, the same joy that caused your baby to leap when the sound of the Christ-bearer reached your ears here in the Divine Service.

Now had Mary not yet been with child when she greeted Elizabeth, there would not have been any joyful leaping. Jesus is the reason for the joy. Mary by herself is of no significance. And today also. Water by itself, without the Word of God, is no bearer of Christ. Bread and wine, apart from the Sacramental use, is just bread and wine. And words that do not convey Christ to the hearer are just words.

Do you understand, therefore, why our Divine Service, from beginning to end, is filled with Christ? It is rich with the Gospel. It is fully pregnant with Jesus Himself so that you are given, not a pair of socks when you come here for worship, but the best Christmas gift of all, your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, why is it then that we can go through an entire Divine Service and act like all we're getting is a pair of socks? I'm not suggesting that you should be leaping around and over the pews. Even Elizabeth didn't leap for joy when Mary greeted her. Yet she did express her joy with words of blessing and thanks to God.

Maybe, if we have a lack of joy, it's because we see only Mary here and not the Christ Mary carries. During the Divine Service you only hear the pastor's voice, and the voices of those who respond and sing. Jesus is truly here for you. Yet He is, as He was for John, the gift which is still unopened. He is all wrapped up with the paper, ribbon, and bow of water, bread, wine, and words.

Nonetheless, here's how it is. On Christmas, when a child is really wanting that special gift, and he just knows that it's somewhere beneath the tree, after he has opened up the socks, and the underwear, and all the other gifts, and one last gift is placed before him, he starts his joyful leaping even before he opens it because he knows, without a doubt, that it's the gift he is wanting.

And so, gather now with me beneath the tree of the cross, and before you is placed one last gift. The opening of this gift is not even necessary. You know what it is, and that it is for you. It is Jesus Christ your Savior who suffered and died on the tree of the cross for you. He is here in the greeting of Mary, carried to you for the forgiveness of your sins. He does not scold you if your joy has been lacking. He forgives you. All of you He forgives. And this is why you do have joy. For this gift of Jesus is yours now, and will be unwrapped fully for your unending joy in heaven. Amen.