

Luke 1:39-45

Did any of you leap into church this morning? Anyone skip down the aisle to your pew? Anybody leap for joy when the words of absolution were spoken? Is anyone planning on leaping up to Holy Communion later? You are happy to be here, aren't you? Christ is here with you and for you. He is here with words of salvation. He is here to release you from your sins and give you His peace. Does this mean anything to us?

In four or five days children will be leaping with joy as they unwrap Christmas gifts. Even adults will be showing joy in various ways as they exchange presents. Why do we show such joy when getting material gifts, but when our Savior comes to give us eternal blessings we can act as though being in church is the last place we want to be on a Sunday morning?

John the Baptist leaped for joy and it wasn't because he got a Nintendo Wii for Christmas. It's because Jesus was there in the same room with him. John wasn't even born yet. He had three months to go, but he was much further along in development than Jesus was. Jesus had just been conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. When Mary entered the home of her relative Elizabeth and greeted her, John leaped for joy within the womb of his mother. He didn't even know who Jesus was. He had the mind of an unborn baby. He didn't know his ABC's. He couldn't count to ten. He had never seen the light of day. But when Mary entered the house with God in her womb and spoke to Elizabeth, John leaped for joy.

Question...if Mary had not been pregnant with Jesus when she entered and greeted Elizabeth, would John have leaped the way he did? The answer would be "no." Mary did not cause John to leap, Jesus did. Without Jesus, whether in the womb of Mary or in our worship, there is no joy. If Christ was not present here for us in church, then it would make sense for us to grumble about coming; to sing half-heartedly or not sing at all; to wear frowns and think of all the other things we could be doing during this hour. Baptism would be just a bath of water. Communion would not be a Sacrament; it would be bread and wine and nothing more. Your pastor would not speak with the authority and power of Christ, and you would receive little benefit in coming. If Jesus was not present here with us and for us, there would be no reason for any of us to leap for joy. But He is here, for this is His promise. Christ is present. And all who have faith; who are filled with the Holy Spirit as John was, respond to Jesus' presence just as John did.

John did not think in the womb...he reacted. He did not reason to himself, "I wonder if I should leap here in the womb? Yes, I believe I will, for I am happy." No...as soon as the sound of Mary's voice reached the ears of Elizabeth, John leaped. It was a "knee-jerk" reaction. When the doctor taps your knee, it jerks. When you slice up an onion, tears come to your eyes. And when Christ enters your life, your church, your home, faith reacts with joy--it can't help it; it just does.

John leaped because he had faith. What about you? We do not need to be leaping all over the place to prove that we're Christians. Elizabeth didn't leap when Mary entered the house with Jesus. The baby in her womb did, but Elizabeth kept both feet on the floor. She did, however, express her faith by opening her mouth and giving a beautiful confession. That was her "knee-jerk" reaction. John's was to leap for joy. Elizabeth's was to express her faith with words. What is your "knee-jerk" reaction? In what ways do you express your faith in the Christ who is here for you?

Knees don't jerk on their own. They react to the doctor's tap. And so with our faith. The ways in which faith shows itself do not come from us. It is the Holy Spirit who causes our faith to react. He

caused John to leap. He caused Elizabeth to speak with joy. And He causes you to show your faith in Christ. The most common reaction the Holy Spirit causes is drawing you here to Jesus' Word and Sacraments. You don't think about whether or not you should come. It's an automatic response to Jesus' love for you. John did not reason in the womb, "Should I leap or not?" He just did. And as a child of God you do not reason in your mind Sunday after Sunday, "Should I come to God's House or not?" You just come. It's a reaction...a faith reaction.

And that's why you come up to the Sacrament again and again. That's why you prepare your offering each week. You do not spend time reasoning out such things. You do these things because you have faith. The Holy Spirit produces these responses within you. That's why some of you took a Christmas stocking for the Loving Hearts charity this month. That's why others of you donate your time and money to other charities. That's why we collected so many Thanksgiving bags this year. And that's why you show love to your brothers and sisters in Christ here, and why you strive to keep the Commandments of our Lord. Your faith is leaping in all these ways. It's a reaction to Jesus who is here with you and for you.

Four thousand years before John leaped within his mother, there was a completely different type of leaping going on. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, and when God came looking for them, they leaped, but not for joy. They leaped up and ran in the other direction. Their "knee-jerk" reaction was one of terror, not joy. They were frightened because they had disobeyed God, and so when His voice came to their ears, "Where are you?" they leaped away to hide from God.

That's not a leap of faith; it's a leap of fear. And sadly that's where so many people today are living--not in faith, but in fear...afraid of God. And so they shy away from the presence of Christ. Their desire is not to be here, as you are hearing the words of Jesus, but to avoid hearing His words. That fear was not in John when Jesus came to him. His leap was not one of fear, but one of faith and joy. If your faith is not leaping much lately, is it because you are living more with the fear of Adam and Eve than with the faith and joy of John?

The good news for you, friend, is that God is not here to punish you but to forgive you. That's not what we deserve. We have all earned death for our sins. But fear not. God came to live in the womb of Mary in order to die your death in hell. The Child of Mary took your place on the cross. He carried your sins. He is your Substitute. When Adam and Eve heard this good news, their fear turned to faith. They did not have to think on it and consider it...the Holy Spirit caused this to happen within them. And He makes it happen for you. Through Jesus' words reaching your ears now, the Holy Spirit convinces you that God has no punishment for you. Christ took it all. He convinces you that God has nothing but love and mercy in His heart toward you. You need not live in fear or in doubt. You are forgiven. Christ gives you life, not death.

And what will your response be to this? What "knee-jerk" reaction will the Holy Spirit produce within you and through you to the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ Jesus? Well, you may leap with joy out of church today...but I doubt it. How about this? God's Spirit will give you joy in life expressed by how you live. He will give you a heart at peace with God and your neighbor. He will help you strive to obey God's Commandments. And He will keep drawing you back here to where Christ is with you and for you. Amen.