

Luke 1:39-45

Babies bring joy into the lives of many even before they are born. When parents, grandparents, and other family members hear the news that a baby has been conceived, they are elated. And when the baby kicks inside the womb, all who see or feel the kick, express themselves with joy. So it is not all that amazing that Elizabeth cried out with excitement when the pregnant Mary came to visit her. We would be amazed only if she had not expressed herself in some way. Nonetheless, this little story, tucked away in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, ought to amaze us very much...not because of Elizabeth's reaction, but because of John's.

Here in this story we see joy coming, not to parents because of a baby as much as joy coming to a baby in the womb because of a parent. When Mary, the mother of our Lord spoke, the baby in Elizabeth "leaped for joy." Her exact words. This was not guesswork on the part of Elizabeth. The Holy Spirit revealed this to her. Even before Mary could tell her the news that she was pregnant, the Holy Spirit told Elizabeth that Mary was with child, and the Child was the Son of God. And when Mary spoke a word of greeting, the same Spirit told Elizabeth that the baby inside her did not just give a gigantic kick; he did a somersault, a back flip, a leap of joy, because of the word that Mary spoke to her.

Now this story is not just a cute baby story intended to bring a smile to our face, and then we brush it aside and get on with our lives. This story is our life. Let me explain. It's not just John who is living within the womb of his mother. We are, too. A baby in the womb is pretty helpless. He is trapped by walls surrounding him. He is not able to go where he wants, or do what he wants. He goes where his mother goes. He listens to the music his mother plays or sings. If she smokes, he smokes. What she eats, he eats. If she is a heavy drinker or a drug addict, so is he.

In a certain sense this world is our mother. We are made of her dust and live within her frame. And we can say, therefore, that we are living within her womb. Like a baby in the womb of his mother, you and I are contained within this world, and the way the world goes is the way we go. If the stock market drops, our investments drop. If sickness comes to our community, it comes to us. If a madman opens fire in a school, we feel the pain as well. We are living within the womb of our mother, and so what happens in the world affects us very much.

Now John had a wonderful mother in Elizabeth, but our mother, mother earth, although God uses her to sustain us in this life, is not a good mother at all. She is like a mother on heroin or meth, passing on to the children within her womb the scars of her addiction. Our mother is full of violence, greed, envy, and selfishness. Even in mid-December, when so many are supposedly in the Christmas spirit, the news stories that we hear shock us...the coldness we see in so many, the lovelessness. My son had just been commissioned as an officer nine days ago, and as we went for lunch, we saw the breaking news on television of the tragedy in Connecticut. And like babies in a womb, we are helpless to put an end to such madness. And there is the fiscal cliff story and we, who are mere babies in the womb, can do nothing about this either as our taxes will be raised to a much higher level next year. All of us could share difficult and sad stories about how we are affected in negative ways by the world in which we live, and by the people in it. We could share stories about how we are as helpless as an unborn baby to deal with these troubles.

But the truth is that each one of us contributes in our own way to this sad state of affairs. For every sinful thing we see in the world dwells within our own heart as well. We are not just babies living

within the womb of our sinful mother; we were conceived in sin--we are just as sinful as the world in which we live.

But friends, listen...besides this sinful mother in whose womb we live, we have another mother...a mother who brings to us joy, and peace, and life, and salvation...a mother who brings Christ to us...our mother, the church. When Mary came to the home of Elizabeth, Mary brought Christ to that home because Jesus was within her. And when Mary spoke a word of greeting, joy filled the heart of John who was living in the womb of Elizabeth. This has great meaning for us. John did not leap for joy just because Jesus was at his door. He leaped when Jesus' mother spoke.

The same Jesus is present here whenever we gather for worship. And every Sunday morning as we are in here, cars go by our front door. Do the people in those cars suddenly leap for joy when they pass by?--since, after all, they are in the presence of the Savior. Of course not. But that joy comes to you as Jesus' mother, the church, speaks to you the words of your God. It's not the sitting here in church which gives you joy. It's the words spoken here, just as it was the word of Mary, who carried Christ, that gave joy to John.

So when the world gets you down, your mother the church, lifts you up with the words she speaks to you here. When the world's sin, and your sin weighs heavily upon you, how wonderful for you that gracious words are spoken here to you from the one who carries Christ to you.

You do not ever see Jesus. Nor did John. Jesus was hidden within the womb of his mother. John's eyes did not fasten upon his Savior, but his ears heard the word that came from Jesus' mother. And so with us. As Jesus was hidden from John, so He is hidden from our eyes as well. But He is here with us just as He was in the presence of John. And more importantly, His word comes to our ears so that, in the midst of our troubles, we live with joy.

Where does Jesus hide Himself? As He says and promises, in the water of Holy Baptism where His word is spoken to make our baptism the womb of Mary through which Jesus gives us forgiveness, and life, and salvation. He is hidden in the Lord's Supper where His flesh and blood are as much present as they were in Mary's womb. We do not see His body and blood, but like John, we do hear the word, "Take eat...Take drink...for the remission of your sins." Christ is hidden in your pastor. As Elizabeth only saw a sinful Mary at her door, so you see only a sinful man up here. Yet, as the word that Mary spoke, because she carried Christ, brought joy to John in the womb, so the word God commands me to speak brings His joy to you.

God does not expect you to leap up in your pew in joy as John did. But His word to you will let you live in joy. For He commands me to announce His grace to all of you, to tell you the good news that your Savior did not remain in the womb of His mother, but He was born, suffered, was crucified, died, and rose again, and all this He did for you. Friends, your sins are forgiven by your gracious God. The punishment you and I deserve was laid upon Jesus. Life and salvation are yours in Him.

To you, living in the darkness of your worldly womb...to you, who is affected very much by the troubles, and violence, and lovelessness of this world...to you, who struggles with the burden of your own sinfulness, your Savior stepped into your troubled world. He was affected by the violence of men who hated Him. But His love is greater than the lovelessness of the world. His mercy is greater than any act of violence. His forgiveness for you is greater than any sin you have done in your life. Go in peace. Live with joy. Jesus is here with you and for you. You are forgiven. His word declares it. Amen.

