

20 December 2015
Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Leap For Joy!”

Text: Luke 1:39-45; Hebrews 10:5-10; Micah 5:2-5a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah
...

That sounds like what many people will be doing this week. Traveling. With haste.

And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Or in other words, she went to see family. Elizabeth was her cousin. And that too is what many people will be doing this week and why they will be traveling: to see and spend time with family.

But now here is where *this* story separates itself from *our* stories, and makes it unique - unlike our Christmas celebrations.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.

Now, babies kicking and poking and moving in the womb is not unusual, but *leaping for joy* (as Elizabeth would later add) is. And I'm sure that little nugget made all the mothers here today cringe! That couldn't have felt good!

Yet Elizabeth is overjoyed, because this out-of-the-ordinary reaction came from an out-of-the-ordinary visit. For this wasn't just cousin Mary visiting, as I'm sure had happened rather ordinarily in the past - this was Mary, *the mother of the Lord*, visiting. And if the mother of the Lord is visiting, then this too: **so is the Lord**. The Lord within her. The Almighty, the one without beginning or ending, the all-present and all-knowing, creator, protector, and preserver of all, the Lord who spoke to Moses from the burning bush and the one who is David's Son yet also David's Lord - is now a tiny baby boy in Mary's womb, and in the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

And so, it would seem, John the Baptist is already starting to fulfill his role as the forerunner of the Christ. For before Mary can tell Elizabeth what has happened to her, John leaps for joy. He knows. And so even before he has a voice, he is crying out and

pointing to the one greater than he. And *filled with the Holy Spirit*, Elizabeth know it too, and is filled with joy.

And so she exclaims: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*

Blessed, not because of who Mary is, but because wherever the Lord is, there is blessing. Just ask the shepherds and the wise men, the blind and the deaf, the lepers and the outcasts, even those Jesus would speak harshly to to shake them out of their sins and turn them back to God. He comes to bless. And where He is, there is blessing. For us too.

But then Elizabeth asks the all-important question: *And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* That is the all-important question because the answer tells us why Christmas is so important. It is the answer, sadly, many are missing in their celebrations of Christmas.

And the answer for us today was given in the reading from Hebrews, the author actually quoting from Psalm 40. For, he says, *when Christ came into the world* (which is what just happened in Mary): *Sacrifices and offering you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book."*

Now, those are words that sound strange, at first, to ears who know their "scroll of the book," their Bibles - *your* ears. Because God *commanded* burnt offerings and sin offerings, and they fill the Old Testament, so how could he say that He did not desire them nor take pleasure in them? Well, because He didn't. They were necessary, but never what God wanted or desired. They were made necessary because of sin, *our* sin, your sin and my sin, but God never wanted His precious creatures slaughtered and their blood poured out all over the place. That's not why He created. But we needed them. And so they were given to us in mercy, by a merciful God. But was God *happy* with sacrifices and killing all those animals? No.

What He wanted is the same thing He wanted in the very beginning; what He wanted from Adam and Eve, but the one thing they were unwilling to do: **to do His will**. To keep His Word and not eat from the tree they were forbidden. That Adam and Eve fear, love, and trust Him above all things. They instead said: *Thanks. All this is great. Really, God. But no thanks. We'll do what we want and eat what we want. We'll obey our own urges and wisdom instead of You and Your Word.*

Sound familiar? It should. It's what we still do, isn't it? Toward God, and toward our parents and other authorities whom God places over us for our good. *Thanks. All this is*

great. Really, God. But no thanks. I'll do what I want instead. And the result for us is the same as it was for Adam and Eve: death.

But God took no pleasure in that either, for death is anti-God. Anti-the-God who is life and gives and sustains all life; who carefully knits us together in our mother's wombs, the psalmist would later tell us (Ps 139). And so first He mercifully set up the sacrificial system in the Old Testament to deal with sin, but those sacrifices were not the answer. For as the verse in Hebrews right before our reading today (v. 4) tells us: *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

But, we heard today that there is one who has ***come to do the will of God, as it is written;*** in fulfillment of all the Scriptures. And this is why ***a body you have prepared for me.*** You see, those words - *a body you have prepared for me* - the author inserted into his quotation of the Psalm. For that's what's new; that's what's different; that's what has now come to pass, that makes John leap for joy. There is now a second Adam, a second bodily man without sin, to do two things: (1.) to do what the first Adam would not do; and (2.) to undo what the first Adam did do. Or in other words, (1.) to live a perfect life, keeping God's Word and will perfectly, and then (2.) laying down that perfect life; offering it up to receive the death, punishment, and condemnation that Adam and Eve and you and me and all the world deserve. To take it in our place and in so doing, be still the God who is life and gives life. For as Elizabeth said and as the leaping John confirmed, that ***body that you have prepared for me***, is not just a body, but **the body of the Lord.**

So, Elizabeth, why has the mother of the Lord come to you, *bringing with her* the Lord who has come to you? It is the same reason why the Lord comes to us still: to forgive us our sin, save us from death, and raise us to life again.

And He has, for as Hebrews goes on to say: ***He abolishes the first*** - the sacrifices of the Old Testament - ***in order to establish the second*** - His own; the fulfillment. ***And by that will we have been sanctified*** - made holy - ***through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.*** We have been - it is a done deal. Signed, sealed, and delivered by that body and blood of Christ. And delivered to us in Word and Absolution and Baptism and Supper - those places where He puts this gift of life for us today. That just as Jesus came to Elizabeth hidden in the womb of His mother, so He might come to us today hidden in these means. And give us the same leaping joy. Christmas joy. Birth-of-the-Lord joy. Forgiveness joy.

For, Elizabeth concludes, ***blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.***

But not just she, Mary. That same blessing is *for you* who believe. For we are not blessed with a forgiveness that means that I can sin and get away with it; a forgiveness that's like how we sometimes think: that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission. No.

That's not Jesus as Saviour; that's Jesus as co-conspirator. That's not Jesus as Saviour, but Jesus as undertaker, helping us dig our own eternal graves.

No, the second Adam came, as Micah said today, *to shepherd his flock . . . that we may dwell secure . . . and to be our peace*. Or to put it in words you've already heard: to (1.) do what we do not do, and (2.) to undo what we do. To undo our old, sinful life, and give us a new, godly life. That we, too, begin to do the will of our Father, who art in heaven, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. That we begin to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. That His birth mean our new birth, to a new life, that has no end.

That our soul, too, *magnify the Lord*, with Mary, Elizabeth, and John. For in the little town of Bethlehem - *too small to be among the clans of Judah*, but not too small for God - our ruler, shepherd, and Saviour was born.

And so **blessed are you**. Whether or not your family gets along when you're all packed together in the same house; whether or not you get the perfect gift or any gifts; whether or not you even feel joyful at this time of year, for many don't. None of that *really* matters. None of that is the make or break of Christmas. Blessed are you who believe. Blessed are you who have been filled with the Holy Spirit in your baptism, whose ears are filled with His Word, and whose mouths are filled with the Body and Blood of Jesus at the altar. Blessed are you who hear and believe that your sins are forgiven. Blessed are you, for the Lord has come to you. That you, too, might leap for joy in Him.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.