

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus rest upon each and every one of you this day.

Today's Gospel is one of my absolute favorite passages in all of Holy Scripture. There's so much good stuff here! We have young Mary coming to her elder cousin, Elizabeth, to share the Good News that she's pregnant. Mary obviously rejoices because the Angel of the Lord told her directly that God was working His salvation miracle through her. She would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and be the mother of our God and Savior in the flesh; "Theotokos," which is Greek for, "the mother of God." Does she reject this gift? No! "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your Word." And that was it. Theologically, it is understood that this is the very moment that divine conception takes place. Mary believes. She doesn't reject. She doesn't doubt. She humbles herself in the obedience of faith, and the Holy Spirit overshadows her and she conceives.

St. Luke then proceeds to tell us that Mary, full of joy and excitement and wonder, goes off in a hurry to share the Good News with her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who was probably quite a bit older than Mary, hears Mary's greeting, and as soon as those words are received, the miracle baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Elizabeth is filled with Holy Spirit, and she cries out in faithful joy, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" She rejoices in the fact that God has so richly blessed Mary with this awesome gift and privilege. And make no mistake: That's what is meant here with the words, "Blessed are you among women...."

And let us not forget that Elizabeth is pregnant too...and she rejoices! She doesn't complain, or doubt. Zechariah on the other hand struggled, doubted, and questioned when the Angel of the Lord told him the Good News. Such behavior earned him a nine-month sentence

of muteness. He was struck mute and rendered unable to talk. (Maybe that's why Elizabeth was so joyous!)

We're never actually told what Elizabeth thought when she first found out that she was pregnant with the "new Elijah" God had sent to prepare the way for His Son. We do know that as soon as the pregnant Mary greets her, the words enter into her body and her baby leaps for joy, which causes her to respond and cry out in joy. Think about that for a moment. There is OUTSTANDING theology at play here! Where does Jesus—the Lord of the Church—dwell in this account? In Mary's womb; in the midst of Mary. Where does our Lord Christ dwell right now? He's here! He's with us, in our midst. He's in the midst/womb of the Church; the place where God gives birth from above to new life; the place where God nurtures and cares for and feeds His precious children of faith. He abides and works and lives within the Church in order to give us life and peace and salvation.

So...looking again at our Gospel, we see Christ dwells within Mary. Mary proclaims "greetings" to Elizabeth. The Greek word for "greetings" is "chairein," which is a cognate/derivative of the word for "peace" (aireine). Now think about that. Let that sink in. Christ dwells within Mary. Mary greets with a greeting of peace; the peace of Christ, who dwells within her. Elizabeth hears this Christly proclamation of peace, and this Word penetrates to her inner-being, greeting and feeding and quickening the little life who dwells within her own womb. This Christly greeting of peace reaches his little ears/soul, and he jumps for joy! He's in the presence of his Lord and Savior. It's not Mary's word or presence that causes this precious little life to rejoice. It's the Word of Christ, which Mary proclaims; the Word which dwells within her; the Word which proceeds from her.

Folks: NOTHING should be different! What is the Church's "job"? Answer: To proclaim the peace of Jesus Christ! That's it! When the Church speaks, you should hear Jesus! I pray that this is the case when our humble little dwelling place of Jesus opens our mouths and makes proclamation and confession. I pray that Christ is heard through us, and not in spite of us. Will some of what you hear cause you to be unsettled and rattled? Yes. God loves you enough to tell you the Truth. He loves you enough to tell you that you are a sinner, and that what you are doing (or not doing) is a sin, the wage of which is death. That should unsettle you! But...that's not the end of the conversation! You are saved and forgiven, not because of what you do or don't do, but solely because you hold fast in faith to the all-availing work and righteousness of Jesus Christ and our heavenly Father's grace, which declares us innocent for Christ's sake. Faith alone in God's grace alone, which is ours because of Christ alone. That's peace! That is to be the message of the Church!

And that's exactly what we see in this little beautiful glimpse of life and faith in action. There is true joy. There is true peace. Mary rejoices and proclaims the joy and peace within her. Elizabeth rejoices. Not only has God kept His Word and promise and sent His Son to deliver man from sin, death, and the grave, but she is standing in the very presence of this Savior. The Messiah has deigned to visit her and greet her with His peace. And just in case Elizabeth was slow to understand or wavered at all in doubt or uncertainty, the blessed and faithful little peanut in her womb stirs about and makes all kinds of joyous commotion, letting his mommy know that she's in the presence of the Christ. He's already doing true and faithful mission work, and he still has three months to go before he leaves the safety of mom's womb and enters into the dark and sinful world that Christ came to redeem.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Nothing has changed. Look around you. We, as God's holy and blessed children, dwell safe and secure within the womb of the Church. We dwell where Christ dwells. He dwells and abides with us, now and always, to the very end of the age. Here He is, reaching out to us to nourish us with His grace, mercy, and peace. May God grant you the joy of faith in all your circumstances, may His joy and peace be ever and always in your hearts and on your lips.

AMEN