

Have you ever had a soda bottle start overflowing and not be able to get the cap back on? Or had a faucet that just wouldn't turn off? Have you ever had news so awesome you started talking and couldn't stop? In such a moment, were you able to rehearse your message or did it just gush and bubble and splash all over whomever you were with?

When was the last time you had that feeling as you thought about Christmas? If you have forgotten, today we can be helped by the witness of Mary, the earthly mother of Jesus! Our question today is "what about Mary?"

As Lutherans, we have problems with Mary, because somewhere along the line celebration of her unique role became such a devotion for some who treated her so differently, it seemed out of place. That was one of the factors of the Reformation as Mary had become almost a co-redeemer, equal to Jesus!

And yet in ignoring Mary, we ignore a powerful illustration of grace and God's unexpected love. And miraculous as a baby in a manger was, just as miraculous was the womb that carried the gift of the unborn Jesus! She alone followed every moment of his earthly life from birth to death and beyond. If we ignore her joy, because of misguided devotion by some, we lose a window into the power of joy that is at the heart of the gift of a Savior we are ready to celebrate.

Imagine a young girl, maybe 13 or 14, engaged to an older man who would become her husband. Imagine her name was Mary and she was just a simple farm girl, just like all the other girls her age. She was no different than the quietest, most unassuming girl today – except she had miraculous news.

Several years ago I was given a newspaper column by Pastor Fred Niedner, who taught theology at Valparaiso University. He constantly received calls "by mistake" as his phone number is one digit off from someone else's. One night he got such a call and heard a young girl say, "I want you to be the first to know that I am having a baby." He wondered who she might be trying to call and suggested that she had a wrong number. There was silence ...

Then she asked a question. "As long as you are on the line, could I ask what you think about the name I have chosen for my baby?" Well the conversation awkwardly continued, and Fred finally sent her on her way with the admonition that no matter what you name your baby, "love her to death."

He wasn't certain how helpful he was, but said he was touched by the fact that this young girl had good news, and needed someone to share it with – anyone! In a way it was sad, for she needed to talk so much it didn't matter who she told. And to this pregnant stranger, who seemed unsure of where to turn, Fred shared the good news of God's love, in the most loving way that he could.

As we reflect on Mary's joy in the text we just read, we are pulled into a much different scenario that is important for us to remember. In Luke's world, where gentiles believed "gods" were "distant" and uncaring, imagine the joy in being able to proclaim that the true God has come near! And Mary was the vehicle to help make this good news real! Mary ran to a relative named Elizabeth, who likely was the only person she felt safe in telling her story to.

What better way to begin our Christmas prelude than with Mary and Elizabeth and overflowing joy? They were REAL people *w/bubbling-can't-keep-it-in JOY!* And how neat that neither had a wrong number but shared joy with the closest and most loved friend that each had!

Again, what should we do with Mary? It is important for us to remember her, not because she is different from us, but precisely because she is like us. Her joy is our joy, and her bubbling excitement is a testament to the gift of the same Messiah whose birth we are preparing to celebrate.

That baby in her womb would be the same Savior who would touch lepers, raise the dead, and gather the outcasts and surprised dinner guests from all around his world and make them one with him. That baby was the same 'God in the Flesh, who would embrace our life and death and change them through his sacrifice and love. She carried and nurtured the unborn Savior of the world.

Mary was the portal through which heaven came to earth. She carried that gift before anyone saw it, and when they could all see, she carried every moment and memory in her heart. The bubbling, happy, joy that flowed out was only the beginning of her song. Rather than ignore Mary, we begin our march into Christmas by listening to her expectant joy, getting a feel and flavor for what the gift of a baby Jesus means for you and me.

Do you remember the most joyful moment in your life? What did others hear and see from you? Because of Christ, why can't every day be like that??? Why can't the same joy that Elizabeth and Mary shared be the joy of your daily lives?

Like giggling expectant parents we are called to carry God's gifts to a hungry world. (Isn't that more exciting than chants of grief, anger, loss, and fear?)

When we take time to remember, the smile will return. When we take time to rejoice, we will light up the room into which we walk and the lives we touch. Don't worry about a script or timing -- if Christ is joy of your life his Spirit will infect those around you – through you – despite you ... JOY is like that!

Several years back I ran an errand for Roxanne to the Candy Lady. A smiling woman was minding the store and teaching her 9 year old granddaughter to "count change." After my purchase, I was feeling pre-Christmas joy and gave the change back to the young girl as a tip for "doing a great job!" To see her eyes

light up was a greater gift to me than I gave to her. And then I wondered, why shouldn't it be that easy all the time?" Why not find ways to share joy every day! How exciting to know our call is not "merely to exist" but to carry God in the "womb" of our lives! Like angels in our world our lives are blessed to announce good news. Like expectant parents, we carry the joy of God's grace!

Look in mirror! How much more fun to smile than frown. To laugh than grumble! God is with us and YOU have a holy purpose! So, what is holding you back?? It isn't God, and it doesn't need to be "you." Remember the joy that got Mary and Elizabeth so excited – we are close to celebrating that same joyous birth!

When I grew up, our favorite lights on the tree were those bubble lights ... and today, I am thinking of those lights and how they can remind me of what this birth is all about. May the ling JOY of miraculous life you carry inside YOU fill those around you with warmth - hope – joy- and peace!
-- tws