15 August 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Commemoration of Mary, Mother of Our Lord Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

"The Joy of Faith"
Text: Luke 1:39-55; Isaiah 61:7-11; Galatians 4:4-7

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

You've heard me say before that saints days are usually celebrated on the day of their death, not the day of their birth, because that is the day of their birthday into heaven. So today is the day the Church set aside to remember Mary's death.

We don't hear of Mary's death in the Scriptures though. No verses to read about that today. It could have been included somewhere, it seems, since the average lifespan of people back then was much shorter than it is today. Some traditions have her living just 10-20 years after Jesus' death and many Biblical books were written after that.

So today, instead of reading about Mary's death or speculating on it, we heard of what made Mary special and significant - the birth of her son. Or, what she did and said right *after* she was told she was going to have a son. Which, I want to propose to you today, **is the day of her death**. The day she died to the life she *thought* she was going to have, and realized God had another plan for her life. A better one.

We all make plans for our lives. What we want to be when we grow up. Where we want to live. Sometimes those plans include getting married and having children. What our spouse will be like. How successful we will be. Live happily ever after. And more. Sometimes those plans work out and sometimes they don't.

But now imagine that God comes along and says, *nope!* What you think, what you're imagining, dreaming, that's not how it's going to be for you at all. I have another plan. A completely different plan . . .

Well, you're a Christian, so okay, perhaps you would say, *I'll go along. You're God, after all . . .*

Good! God replies. Now, about my plan . . . That big fancy marriage you were hoping for, no. You're actually going to get pregnant before you're married. These days, no one bats an eye at that. But in those days, that was still a big deal. Joseph would <u>not</u> be pleased. Oh, and the son you are going to have, He'll be spoken against and opposed. Many will hate Him. In fact, He's going to be crucified, and you'll be there. You're going

to see Him agonize and then take His final breath. And it's going to feel as if a sword is piercing your soul also. That's my plan for you.

Uh . . . I thought this was going to be a *better* plan . . .

Now, ***you*** know, of course, that it was. But better doesn't mean easier. And life, from this day forth, was certainly not easier for Mary.

Luther marvelled at Mary's faith, that she was able to assent to the Word of the Lord that the angel Gabriel spoke to her. *Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word* (Luke 1:38). And that is remarkable. But I think what made Mary remarkable was not just her faith, but her joy. ***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior***, we heard her say today. And remember, she spoke those words - we're not told *exactly* when - but not many days after being told that her life was going to be far different than the way she thought. That her plans were not going to come about. That her life was going to be a lot more difficult than she imagined . . .

And her response? **Yes!** ***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!*** Mary's voice was not one of grudging resignation or resentment, but a voice of joy. The joy born from a faith that was born from the words and promises of God. A faith that rejoices *even* when things don't look or seem or feel good at all. And that's remarkable.

This week in our Vacation Bible School, one of the stories we heard was the story of Joseph. He was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, thrown into prison because someone lied about him, but then rose to be second in command of all Egypt (the vice president of Egypt, we called him!). When he finally reunited with his brothers, he forgave them and then said that what they meant for evil, God meant for good (Genesis 50:20), and he rejoiced in the plan of God. But that was some 13 years later, after he saw how God's plan all worked out. Do you think he was rejoicing *as* he was being hauled down to Egypt to be a slave?

Two years ago this past week is when my father died and was called home to his eternal rest. And while we rejoiced in the promises of God given to him and in knowing that though old age and sickness had taken his life, he wasn't really dead, but now with his Lord, still, we were sad. We'd have liked to have him with us longer. . . . But then, a couple of months after he died, the news started being taken over by this thing called the Coronavirus - maybe you heard of it? And then things got locked down and had my father lived, we would not have been able to see him or visit him for who knows how long! With his memory problems he would not have understood and we would have been worried and frustrated . . . and we realized - later! - how the plan of God was good after all; how God had taken him at just the right time; had spared him of having to live - or not - through that. And then we could rejoice.

And those are just two examples . . . we could go through the Bible and examples from history all day and note other examples of this, how people rejoiced in the plan of God *after* going though a time - sometimes very long - of hardship, trouble, doubt, and fear.

So I think that's what makes what Mary says here so remarkable, and such an example for us: she says it *before* she sees how it all works out. Faith rejoices not because it sees or knows, but because of the words and promises of God. Which, it turns out, are *more sure* that what we see or feel or think we know.

So Mary uses some words from the prophet **Isaiah** that we heard today to express her trust. She uses some words from **Hannah**, the mother of Samuel, to express her joy. She mentions **Abraham**, and how God had fulfilled and was - even now - fulfilling His words and promises to him. You see, it wasn't her, but the Scriptures and God's history of faithfulness that gave her the faith to rejoice *even before* she knew how it would all turn out.

And that's true for you and me as well. And if we don't, why is that? Is that a sign we don't know our Scriptures well enough? Is that an indication that we are trusting in ourselves too much? Is that because we want our own way and not God's way? Is that because our thinking is too much like the world's and not enough like God's? Perhaps it is all of the above. And a reason for us to repent.

To repent of ourselves and turn to the Lord for the joy and faith and confidence we need. To read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures so they become a part of who we are and how we think. To remember our baptism each day and all the promises God gave to us there. To come and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus - the same Body and Blood born to Mary - and receive the forgiveness and life we need. To turn to the Lord in all these ways, and rejoice in our good and faithful Father, whose words and promises are the most sure and true thing on this earth.

Imagine if we did that! Turned to the Lord and rejoiced like Mary *no matter what*. Think that would make a difference in your life? And maybe the lives of others, too?

This is something we also leaned in our Vacation Bible School this week. Our theme was *Jesus Is Our Brother*, which also means that God is our Father. For joined to Jesus in baptism and receiving His Spirit, *His* Father becomes *our* Father (which is also what He teaches us to pray, right? In the Lord's Prayer . . . how does that start? *Our* Father . . .). So as the verses from Galatians that we heard today said, ***In the fullness of time*** (or at just the right time), ***God sent His Son*** into the world to be our flesh and blood brother, to ***redeem us*** and so that ***we might receive adoption as sons*** (in baptism). And so now we have God as our Father and can cry out ***Abba! Father! as sons*** (and daughters) ***of God*** and ***heirs*** - inheritors - of His promises. That all that He said and promised is not just for

others, but for ME.

This is what enabled those early Christian martyrs to be joyful even in the face of beast and flame. All the modern day martyrs, too. For *if* (as I proposed at the beginning of this sermon) Mary ***died*** to the hopes and plans she had for her life when she received the words and promises of God from the angel Gabriel, she also ***rose*** that day to live in the life God had for her, and she rejoiced in it - in Him.

And so, too, the day we received the words and promises of God in baptism. Our old selves died with Jesus in those waters and a new person emerged from those waters to live the life God has for us. A life, perhaps, not as we hope or think or want, but better. For it is His life, not ours. Not ours to do whatever we want, but to rejoice in our Father and Saviour, and follow where He leads. Because we know the end of the road where He leads is eternal life with Him.

So imagine . . . when we receive good news or when we receive bad news, when our life goes off the rails or is charging full steam ahead, when the unexpected or unplanned happens, when we are faced with challenges or when those challenges are overcome, when a curveball comes your way, when we are faced with a fork in the road and we don't know which way to turn, whether things are going well or not so well, we said with Mary: ***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.***

If you think you don't have that kind of faith, you're wrong, dear Christians! **You do.** Because it's not from you or of you, but what Jesus gave to you. We simply need to live it, and feed and strengthen it with our Lord's words and promises.

Mary wasn't the Mother of Our Lord because she was better than you or purer than you, but simply because God chose her, *sola gratia*, by grace alone. And that's the same for you. He chose you *sola gratia*, and is using you for great things as well. Maybe not great in the eyes of the world, but great in His eyes.

So today we commemorate Mary. She's important. What God used her for is important. We don't ignore her or exalt her too much. We honor her, yes. But worship her, no. And we learn from her. Of our Lord and His faithfulness. And the best way we can commemorate her today is to come up here again to the altar and receive the Body and Blood of the son she bore, the God-man, the promised Messiah, and give thanks for Him and all that He has done for us. That we are the hungry He fills, the lowly He exalts, the sinners He forgives, the poor He helps, the weak He strengthens, the mourning He comforts, the sad He cheers, the doubting He assures, and the dead He raises to life. Because that's the kind of God He is. From the beginning of time to the end of time. For Mary, and for you and me.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.