In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The older I get, the more affection I have for that young woman Mary. She bears the Christ Child, and her heart overflows with joy and gratitude to God. My opening text, then, comes from her song of joy, the Magnificat. It is a song Vicar Caleb regularly leads us in singing in our Wednesday evening Vespers service. Let me lift up the opening verses of Mary’s hymn:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. (Luke 1:46-48, RSV)

Mary teaches the Church to rejoice in God our Savior. Life becomes busy, life can become stressful and confusing, and we can lose our way when it comes to the big picture. Even when we are immersed in good work, the ebbs and flows of that work can weigh us down and tempt us to forget the many blessings of life. But Mary teaches us to rejoice — to let gratitude to God be the fundamental stance of our souls.

What a wild ride this young person has been on! Sacred Scripture tells us nothing of her childhood, but why should we not think that she was a child like other children? So picture her obeying her parents, doing her chores, going to synagogue, skipping and dancing and playing with her friends. Her childhood passes in the ordinary way. I bet she was loved by her family and neighbors. I hope so.

But now she is a teenager. Her body is changing, along with her hopes and dreams in life. Did she desire a spiritual vocation? Did she yearn for a life of prayer and meditation on Sacred Scripture? Did she want to be a celibate? Judging by the story, I think not. When the angel Gabriel visits her, she is already engaged to be married. She aims to marry Joseph. Let us imagine her eager about that. She hopes for lifelong love, she hopes for children, she resolves to be a good manager of the household, she means to join Joseph in building a life together.

They are poor. In her Magnificat, Mary will refer to her “low estate.” Luther pictures her as a maidservant. He writes this:

Even in her own town of Nazareth she was not the daughter of one of the chief rulers, but a poor and plain
citizen’s daughter, whom none looked up to or esteemed. To her neighbors and their daughters she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today, who does as she is told around the house.

She and Joseph are not wealthy. But Joseph is a carpenter, and there is always need for a carpenter. They can look forward to steady work, as long as Joseph’s health holds up. And so it is that until the point when the angel Gabriel appears, Mary is a young woman aiming for marriage. She might have had a rich internal life of prayer and meditation, or she might simply have had a childlike faith in the God of Israel. We know that she is engaged to be married, but we know little else about her. Ah, but when Gabriel comes along, we find Mary to be an extraordinary person of faith. When Gabriel comes along, this young person suddenly shines before our eyes. She is a beautiful example of faith in the God of Israel. Years later, her son Jesus will pray a great prayer of self-surrender — a prayer that Mary has already prayed as a young woman. In Gethsemane, Jesus will end his anguished prayer with words of surrender to the will of his heavenly Father:

Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42, KJV)

Here, the Son follows the example of his mother. Years ago, Mary had said a similar thing. She had said words that forever changed her life. When Gabriel tells her the perplexing news that she will bear the Christ Child, Mary answers most simply:

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. (Luke 1:38, KJV)

With these words, young Mary casts her fate to the wind. Or rather, she casts her fate into the hands of God. Who can help but honor her for that! Yes, the older I get, the more I admire this young woman.

In Martin Luther’s Treatise on the Magnificat, he emphasizes the grace of God that looks so kindly upon a servant maid in a small village. Luther speaks of our God as if He were far-sighted. By contrast, I am near-sighted. I do not need my eyeglasses to see things close at hand. In fact, I usually take off my

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1 *Luther’s Works*, Volume 21, pages 295ff.
glasses in order to read. On the other hand, I cannot seek distant things without my glasses. But Luther speaks of the Lord as if he sees distant things fine — even better than things close to him. Luther is commenting on the Psalms, and it leads him to speak of God’s far-sightedness. Luther writes this:

...in Psalm 138:6 [we read]: “Though the Lord is high, He regards the lowly…” [And in Psalm 113:5, 6 we read]: “Who is like the Lord, our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?”...the farther one is beneath Him, the better does He see him.

And this is good news for Mary, for she is one of the little ones of earth. She is the sort of girl the world overlooks. The society pages might speak of the daughters of the high priest, but seldom do they speak of a village maid like Mary. Luther speaks of the natural inclination of our eyes toward the glorious ones of earth:

Doubtless there were in Jerusalem daughters of the chief priests and counselors who were rich, comely, youthful, cultured, and held in high renown by all the people.

But Gabriel did not appear to these cultured daughters of Jerusalem. Instead, he appeared to a simple village girl. Her simplicity, her poverty, her youth — none of these ordinary things shielded her from the loving regard of our God. The more lowly she be, the better the Lord sees her.

In years past, I have quoted a certain passage from Luther, and I want to do it again. It is about Mary — the way she continues to be a humble village girl even after she learns that she is to bear the Christ Child. Luther is convinced that Mary remains a humble young woman. His evidence is the Magnificat itself. In Mary’s song of joy, she does not sing of how she somehow deserved to be the mother of the Christ Child. Rather, she simply rejoices in God's regard for her, a lowly one of earth. And so Luther concludes that Mary continues in her humility and her devotion to God. He writes this following passage I love so much:

She conducts herself as before, when she still had nothing of all this; she demands no higher honors than before. She is not puffed up, does not vaunt herself or proclaim with a loud voice that she is become the Mother of God. She seeks not any glory, but goes about her usual household duties, milking the cows, cooking the meals, washing pots and kettles, sweeping out the rooms, and performing the work of maidservant or housemother in lowly and
despised tasks, as though she cared nothing for such great gifts and graces. She was esteemed among other women and her neighbors no more highly than before, nor desired to be, but remained a poor townswoman, one of the great multitude. Oh, how simple and pure a heart was hers, how strange a soul was this! What great things are hidden here under this lowly exterior! How many came in contact with her, talked, and ate and drank with her, who perhaps despised her and counted her but a common, poor, and simple village maiden, and who, had they known, would have fled from her in terror.

Ah, bless Mary for her humility, for her surrender to the will of God, and for her praise of our God. She teaches us to rejoice in God our Saviour.

I am speaking of two themes. One theme is the blessed far-sightedness of our God — the way he can see us when we are far off, down in the dumps, having a bad day or a bad season in life. My second theme flows naturally from the first one. Mary teaches the Church to rejoice in God our Savior. We have a God who pays attention to us even if we should be among the lowly, the little people of earth, down and out, sick or elderly, without a shirt on our back or a penny to our name. Our God is the kind of God who does not avert his eyes from us when we are in tough straights, but lifts even higher his attention and his love for us. And this is something to be happy about. This is something for which to praise our God.

In last Sunday's Epistle Lesson, Saint Paul said this:

Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4, KJV)

It is as if saying “rejoice” one time is not enough for the apostle. He doubles down on his exhortation: “... and again I say, Rejoice.”

In Compline this past Sunday evening, we sang Psalm 34. It includes this verse:

18 The LORD is near to the | brokenhearted*
    and will save those whose spir- | its are crushed. (Psalm 34, LBW)

There are indeed brokenhearted people in this world. You might even be among them, either now, or in your past, or in the days ahead. If so, know this: Being brokenhearted slides us more and more into the loving attention of our God. Some people shy away from those who are sad. Not our Maker! He is
drawn to them especially. And this is a reason for us to Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say, Rejoice!

Ordinary life has its ups and downs, but Mary - this young woman we remember today - Mary points us toward a fundamentally happy stance in life. If Jesus were not raised from the dead, things would be different. If the devil could somehow undo Easter, then it would no longer be the case that we can “walk through the valley of the shadow of death [but] fear no evil.” But away with the devil! He cannot undo Easter. He cannot reverse Mary’s consent to her holy Child. He cannot stop those shepherd abiding in the field by night. He cannot send them home. No, they are off to hear the angels sing their Gloria and they shall hear it:

    Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.

This earth of ours has been visited and blessed by the Babe of Bethlehem. Mary knows to rejoice in that. Let us join her in giving thanks for her Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.