



THE ANTIDOTE TO HOLIDAY BLUES

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Luke 1:39-55

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Why is the Christmas season often accompanied by stress, a sense of emptiness and disappointment, even pain? Why do arguments over Christmas trees, the color and type of lights, and control of the kitchen seem to be part and parcel of our holiday experience? Why is it that many people can't wait to get Christmas over with, or in some cases try to avoid it altogether?

Christmas brings high hopes for unity, intimate times with family, and harmony with loved ones and neighbors. We hope to experience perfect Norman Rockwell scenes in our homes: trees laden with presents, the cat and the dog curled up by the fire, good books, a football game on television, conversation with a loved one with our favorite steaming beverage in hand. But it rarely happens that way. There is always one more present to wrap, a food item to chase down, another argument to quell, tension to diffuse, stress to overcome, emptiness to fill.

The problem is that we are looking in all the wrong places. We tend to look to our circumstances and surroundings to find joy. Occasionally we taste of the true delight of Christmas, but these times are fleeting. We want to enter into these beautiful images of Christmas, but they seem ephemeral.

This morning, the last Sunday before Christmas, we come to one of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture, the words of Mary, from the opening chapter of Luke's gospel. We will consider this song and the scene leading up to it, dwelling on Mary's words, reflecting and savoring this wonderful text. These verses will fill our emptiness and give voice to our deepest longings. They will help us fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

Two Sundays ago, John Hanneman shared how in our barrenness we feel lost, hopeless and empty at times. But it is this very barrenness that prepares us for Advent. Last week, Gary Vanderet spoke about Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. Mary wondered how these things could be. The angel responded, "Nothing is impossible with God." Indeed, no matter how bleak our circumstances, nothing is impossible with God. Nothing can thwart his plan of redemption.

We resume the story today, in Luke 1:39.

Now at this time Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it came about that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greet-

ing, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:39-41, NASB)

I. The Joy of Elizabeth

This scene comes right on the heels of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. Luke is careful to say that Mary moves with haste to visit Elizabeth. She knows that it will be a dangerous journey, yet she leaves right away.

Some say that Mary was fleeing the inevitable gossip and derision that was the lot of a young, pregnant, unmarried woman. But that doesn't begin to capture the magnitude of what is happening here. Mary has been visited by an angel! The wonder of such an event cannot be kept inside. And who is going to believe her, much less enter into the enormity of what the angel revealed to her? Only Elizabeth. According to Gabriel, she too was part of this great salvation drama.

Entering Elizabeth's home and greeting her relative, Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb. Some might have difficulty believing this, but remember Luke 1:15, "he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb." John is already playing out his role of preparing the way for Messiah. It should come as no surprise that this babe in the womb recognizes the only hope of the world. Oh, that we too would leap at this news!

Luke records that Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" as she exclaimed in response to Mary's arrival. Exactly when she was filled with the Holy Spirit isn't important. Luke includes this so that we might fully understand what is coming next. Overflowing with the Spirit's presence, he says, she "cried out with a loud voice":

And she cried out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." (1:42-45)

Through Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit bestows upon Mary exactly what she will need, not only in the coming months but for the rest of her life. If there are any doubts in Mary's heart, Elizabeth erases them with her proclamation of joy and wonder. It's clear that apart

from the Spirit's prompting she has no way of knowing what has transpired with Mary. What a gracious gift to Mary, for she would need great comfort and courage! Her betrothed would try to divorce her. Her community would look upon her with scorn. She would travel to a strange town and give birth to her baby in a filthy cave. She would be forced to flee King Herod. Her community as a young mother and wife would be in the strange and powerful land of Egypt. Her son's ministry would confuse her. Ultimately her soul would be pierced by unspeakable pain as her nation turned its back on Jesus, executing him in a most excruciating manner.

Elizabeth ends her song of wonder and blessing to Mary by saying, "Blessed is she who believed, that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." Quoting Elizabeth, Luke echoes Abraham's response in Genesis 15:6, "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Belief is the key to blessing. Blessing is not the result of our efforts to please God; it is the result of our belief. God has done the work.

Notice that Elizabeth begins her song by saying, "Blessed among women." The Greek word translated blessed, used two times in verse 42, means to speak well of. Ultimately, of course, what others say about us is not important. What's most important is what we believe and whom we serve.

So Elizabeth ends her song with another kind of blessing, a word meaning happiness, contentment, "blessed is she who believed." Mary, who was all of thirteen, fourteen or perhaps fifteen years old, believed. In the face of overwhelming consequences she believed and entered in.

This brings us to Mary's response to Elizabeth's stunning words.

II. The Wonder of Mary—the Magnificat

And Mary said:

"My soul exalts the LORD,

And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave;

For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;

And holy is His name.

AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION

TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. (1:46-50)

Mary begins her song in this outpouring of praise that we have come to know so well. These verses have been sung countless times, in hundreds of different musical settings. They have been part of the daily lives of believers for nearly sixteen hundred years. Mary has been given an honor beyond description, a burden beyond comprehension—and her first words are of God. Overwhelmed, she bursts out in a note of the highest praise and declares herself a disciple of the living Lord.

Some hold that this language, this beautifully crafted poetry is beyond a young woman of Mary's humble origins. That may be so, but it is not beyond the Spirit of God. Mary draws upon the language of poetry and prayer found throughout the Old Testament, texts that are steeped in words of praise to Yahweh.

It is not naïve to think that Mary's faith and learning, ignited by the Holy Spirit, combine to create a song that captures the magnitude of what God is doing. So beautiful and profound is this song it has its own name, *Magnificat*, Latin for magnify. Her song takes a profusion of Old Testament words and images to create a mosaic of worship.

She begins by echoing the response of another woman of God, Hannah, who also was blessed with a child through God's miraculous intervention.

My heart exults in the LORD;

My horn is exalted in the LORD,

My mouth speaks boldly against my enemies,

Because I rejoice in Thy salvation. (1 Sam 2:1)

Hannah's barren womb was opened by the Lord to bless her and her husband with one who would lead Israel. Her son was the great prophet Samuel who, like John, prepared the way for God's choice of king, David, in a foretaste of the ultimate king, Jesus Christ.

Luke's introduction, the understated "And Mary said:," is the perfect set-up for her exclamation of praise, because it needs no build-up. "My soul exalts the Lord."

Mary declares the state of her soul: she exalts, or magnifies, the Lord. Then, in common Hebrew fashion, she repeats herself, adding color and intensity: "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."

Mary worships. That is why we come to this place: to worship, to magnify God's name, to increase him and decrease ourselves, to acknowledge his position as our Savior and Lord.

And Mary is just getting started. She continues with a trio of poetic couplets extolling the work of the Lord. First, in her life:

"For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave;

For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;

And holy is His name.

AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION

TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. (1:48-50)

Mary recognizes what God is doing. We would expect the king of the universe, the Messiah, to appear in Jerusalem with music blaring, a laser light show, a troupe of dancers and pop stars, with the three tenors singing famous arias. We would expect a parade, with speeches of praise and acclaim from all manner of dignitaries. But instead we read, "He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave." Mary is profoundly

humbled that God would choose her, a simple peasant girl of lowly means, as the conduit for his invasion of earth.

Then Mary recognizes, not out of pride but out of wonder, that all generations would call her blessed. The king of the universe enters the scene through a humble peasant girl—as a baby! It's brilliant! Just when we think we have it all figured out, God throws us these great heavenly curve-balls that leave us amazed. And Mary understands what he is doing.

She goes on, continuing to recount God's work in her life: "For the mighty one has done great things for me." Notice that Mary doesn't add, "because I have been so faithful, so pure, so consistent in my temple attendance." No. Her response to God's goodness is worship: "holy is His name."

Here we come to the turning point of Mary's song, verse 50. This is where we see what worship does to us. Quoting Psalm 103:7, Mary says: "His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear him." Notice two things here. First, this is all about God's mercy. These events turn on one important truth, one unchangeable constant: God's mercy, his *hesed*, his loyal love is driving all of this. God will not leave us in darkness, because he is merciful toward us with loyal and unending love.

Now notice what this does to Mary's perspective. It changes from wonder at how the Lord has blessed her to how he in fact has blessed the entire community of faith, generation after generation. As she worships, her world view is enlarged. This is not just a personal hymn of praise, but a community hymn.

**"He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who were proud in the
thoughts of their heart.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.
HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS;
And sent away the rich empty-handed. (1:51-53)**

Like Hannah in 1 Samuel, Mary moves from personal worship to a community perspective, praising the great works of the Lord. Both women have a new lens and a grand sense of what the Lord is doing through the fulfillment of his promises.

In this second set of poetic couplets we see, first, the nature of God's work: "mighty deeds with His arm." And the result for the proud: "he has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart." Then we see the destiny of arrogant rulers: "He has brought down rulers from their throne." And, foreshadowing the destiny of Mary's own son, the destiny for the humble: "He has exalted those who were humble." Again, Mary weaves words from the psalms and from Hannah's song into her own: "He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed."

Comparing this to Hannah's song, we find that Mary's world view is growing as well. Hannah's prayer

and Mary's prayer become our prayers, too.

During my sophomore year at college I experienced the lowest point in my life spiritually and emotionally. No longer was I a star athlete or a star student. No longer was I a big man on campus, dating my high school sweetheart. All that had shaped my identity and formed my worth to that point in life had been stripped away. I was deeply insecure and unsure of myself. In the midst of all this, Brian Morgan began to teach me the book of Romans. He had no notion of my true internal state. As we studied the text, Brian said, "This is who you are, Mark. Your identity is shaped by Jesus Christ. You are his man, a man of God." For the first time in my life I knew my identity, who I really am. As I prayed and worshiped in response to this revelation, I began to move out of my myopic world of self-doubt and pity. God enlarged my view of the world and what he was doing. Suddenly I realized I was a part of something much bigger than myself. It was a revolutionary time for me.

As Mary's world view is enlarged, so is ours. Like her, we begin by realizing and acknowledging what God has done for us; then we start to look outside ourselves and rejoice in what he is doing for all mankind. Mary's world view is so large that here we are, two thousand years later, singing this same song, given to Mary by the Holy Spirit, now given to us by the Spirit through the Word.

Finally, we come to the end of her song, where God's motivation is revealed. Our God of justice has every right to call an end to his creation. In our pride we have turned away from relationship with him to worship at the feet of wealth, power, status and influence. But God doesn't turn away from us. The text tells us why:

**"He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his offspring forever." (1:54-55).**

The Lord God is a God of unending mercy. And the arrival of Jesus Christ is the ultimate demonstration of his covenant mercy.

The end of the song is very fitting. There is a calming and sure sense of fulfillment even though Jesus' ministry, crucifixion and resurrection are yet to come. Fulfillment can be claimed because Jesus' arrival indicates God's determination to complete what he has started. There would be no sense in God sending Gabriel to Elizabeth and Mary, announcing the gift of sons to them in the most remarkable way, unless he fully intended to deliver his people as promised. Likewise, we can be just as certain, because we who believe are grafted in to become Abraham's offspring.

When we worship, God expands our vision. With this new perspective we are better able to grapple with life's pain and our failed expectations.

I want to leave you with four thoughts.

1. God is mindful of our humble state.

When I say this, I'm not talking about living in modest valley, suburban homes compared to living in mansions on the hillsides. I'm talking about those of you with jobs, careers, and companies crumbling about you; of marriages in desperate trouble; broken, dysfunctional families with seemingly no hope for unity and peace; homes with wayward sons and daughters; lives racked with pain from disease: cancer, Alzheimer's, AIDS; those whose worlds have been shaken by death

The good news of Jesus Christ is that God indeed is mindful of our humble estate, and that he has done something about it. The babe in the manger came to show us that there is so much more to life than what we see, know and struggle with here on earth.

2. God's only requirement is that we fear him.

God wants us to walk with him, to submit to him and revere him. Let us seek his gracious help in setting aside our arrogance and bow before him.

3. God honors the humble.

In our community some are blessed with great wealth, prestige and influence, and some are not. But it really doesn't matter. The question is, regardless of our socio-economic standing, will we humble ourselves in the face of the living God? He has reached out to us in unfailing mercy and loyal love. He has intervened in miraculous and unpredictable ways to draw us into eternal relationship with him. But will we humble ourselves?

4. God will not forget his people.

God is faithful to remember us; let us dwell on his goodness. As we gather around the tree, let us celebrate in the knowledge of his mercy. If we do, we will find ourselves celebrating, giving and receiving not out of familial, cultural or commercial obligations, not out of expectation of a magical and transcendent experience, but simply out of hearts overflowing with the wonder of what God has done in Christ.

If everything starts with God, we will not be disappointed. As our souls are permeated with this truth, whatever happens around us won't matter. We can simply enjoy what comes, what blows up, what burns out, what falls over, with a new sense of freedom. We'll begin to have a new lens to appreciate life.

This does not mean that the pain will go away; it means that we can rejoice in the midst of the pain, in spite of it. And as we do so, God's mercy will begin to permeate our being and satisfying our longings, until that day when there will be no more pain, no more tears, no more fear.

David Roper, in one of his periodic *E-Musings*, writes about Jeanne Guyon,

a 17th century woman who, at age 16, was forced into an arranged marriage with an invalid forty years older than she. She found her marriage to be a place of utter humiliation. Her husband was an angry melancholic. Her mother-in-law was a merciless critic. Even her servant girl despised her. Despite her best attempts at devotion to her husband and family, she found herself subject to relentless criticism and hostility.

Roper goes on to quote from one of her writings:

Here is a true spiritual principle that the Lord will not deny: God gives us the cross and the cross gives us God... Abandonment (to his cross) is the key to the inward spiritual life. It is the key to fathomless depths.

May the song of Mary be your song this Christmas. May that ache in your soul be displaced by the sweet presence of God's Spirit. May your wounded heart be caressed by the tender hands of Jesus, born in Bethlehem. Know that God is mindful of your pain. Fear the Mighty One. Be engulfed by his mercy. Know that you are the apple of his eye, that he delights in you. Go in the richness of his shalom. Amen.

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