

THE MAGNIFICAT**LUKE 1:46-55**

Peter Brueghel was a 16th century Dutch painter. One of his paintings shown here is entitled “The Census.” It portrays the famous census referenced in the Bible that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem just before Jesus’ birth. The painting doesn’t look like the land of Israel with it’s architecture and snow, but that’s not the point. It shows a lot of people in a long line waiting to be registered. You can see lots of busy people and active commerce going on. At first glance you think this is a painting of a crowd of people – until you look down at the bottom right corner of it. There you notice a man pulling a donkey which is carrying a very pregnant woman. Maybe Brueghel’s point was it’s easy to miss Joseph and Mary. You have to look hard to find them. They seem insignificant and unimportant in relation to everything else going on in this busy scene. And yet we know they were at the very center of this great, divine drama of Jesus’ birth. Christmas itself is a bit like that, isn’t it? So many people miss the real point of Christmas and yet at Christmastime they get so close.

This morning is the first Sunday of the Advent season – this wonderful time of year set aside by Christians all over the world to reflect on the meaning of Jesus’ birth. In the first two chapters of the Gospel according to Luke, we find four poems that were probably set to music and sung by the very first Christians as an expression of their faith. Over the years these poems were given Latin names or titles: the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria in Excelsis, and the Nunc Dimittis. As a group, we could call them the canticles of the Christ child and they are our focus this Advent season.

Today, let’s consider together the song attributed to Mary, Jesus’ mother. It’s called the Magnificat which comes from the Latin word “magnifico” which means “magnify” or “make great.” An angel had appeared to Mary and told her she would become pregnant with none other than the Messiah: the savior of the Jewish people. This pregnancy was going to be supernatural in its origin. Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph, but they hadn’t been intimate yet. Mary was a virgin. God Himself took one of Mary’s eggs and miraculously supplied the necessary fertilization creating a human embryo in her womb. Now, people back then and there were no more willing to accept that kind of explanation for Mary’s pregnancy than most folk here and now.

Perhaps that’s why Mary was sent off to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth was experiencing her own miraculous pregnancy which resulted in the birth of John the Baptist. When these two cousins met – Mary and Elizabeth – the Bible says the baby inside Elizabeth began to move around in an excited, agitated way. At that very moment, the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth and she spoke a word of prophecy concerning the baby developing inside Mary. Mary responded and her words are now referred to as the Magnificat. Let’s read it now. The Magnificat reminds me of three simple but important truths about Christmas we should remember and take to heart at the beginning of this wonderful season. First of all...

CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE ORDINARY PERSON.

Have you ever noticed the emphasis our culture puts on finding your self-worth or value? That could only be true if there exists a tremendous lack of self-worth among many people today. We live in a world that seeks to convey self-worth in a variety of ways. Self-worth is often tied to success. In our culture, those two words or concepts are almost synonymous. If you become financially successfully, you will have self-worth. If you have successful relationships, you will have self-worth. But how do you define success? How do you define financial success? What happens if you lose your job or experience bankruptcy? Do you lose your value as a person? What's your definition of educational success? If you don't have a degree after your name, are you worth less than those who do? How do you define relational success? And what happens if you experience divorce or some other kind of relationship disaster? Do you lose value or is your self-worth now less?

The Bible teaches a proper sense of self-worth depends on your relationship with God. In other words, your value as a human being is derived from God. It's not something you or others convey on yourself nor is it something that an amount of money, education level, or achievements in life give to you either. If you lack a personal relationship with God through Jesus this morning, it's no surprise why you struggle with feelings of worthiness. You're cut off from the real source of your worth – God Himself. God is the One who says you have value. God has established your importance. God says you have significance. So, if for whatever reason, you ignore God, or find little use for Him in your everyday life, or you try to discover your worth in other things besides God, it's inevitable a question about your ultimate value will creep into your soul. This is one reason Jesus came at Christmas. We all need a relationship with God desperately. It's impossible to be whole, complete, or to feel truly valuable without a vital, personal relationship with God through Jesus.

OK, but don't Christians sometimes struggle with feelings of low self-esteem? Indeed, they can. Can't a person who's put his or her trust in Jesus still question his or her own worth or value? Yes, of course. Why? Sometimes it's the result of emotional damage in a person's life. Sometimes it's the devil trying to tear down one of God's children spiritually. And sometimes it's because we've bought into what our culture preaches: that your value and mine is determined by things like money, possessions, achievements, accomplishments, or even a lack of problems in life. Just because we love Jesus and possess eternal life doesn't mean we always think biblically!

Here's where reflecting on Mary's song – the Magnificat – is helpful to me. Mary admitted she wasn't an important person in the world's eyes. She knew she was way down on the socio-economic ladder of life. But instead of getting discouraged over it, she actually rejoiced in it! "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl." (Lk. 1:46-48 NLT) Think with me about Mary. She was a woman. Women had very little status in her day and age. Mary was from a lower class, peasant, blue collar family. No pedigree, no credentials, nothing noble or well-born about her, so to speak. Then, she was a virgin.

We've so glorified that aspect of Mary that we forget virginity was understood differently in her day. Back then, when a woman became a wife or mother, she was given a certain level of respect in that culture, but a young virgin from an inconsequential family was really at the bottom of what that society valued in terms of people and their worth. Forget about just being ordinary! Mary, by all the ways people defined human worth and value in her day and age, was a nobody – plain and simple.

But Mary knew something here we tend to forget. What? Christmas is for the ordinary person, because God loves the ordinary person. In fact, God seems to prefer showing His mercy, love, and power to and in those who seem least likely to receive or deserve it. God loves insignificant people. God loves unimportant people. God values people who our culture dismisses as being of marginal worth. In fact, God seems to focus His time, energy, and efforts upon exactly those kinds of folk! The Bible explains why this is the case. "Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"?... Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:26-30 MSG) Mary is a fulfillment of those verses. It's all about who is going to get the glory! God always chooses to work in and through people who say through their lives and their actions, "God, it's all about You not me!"

If you feel just ordinary today, rejoice! Celebrate how unimportant and insignificant you are! But, perhaps, you feel much less than ordinary. Perhaps you feel unworthy. Do you think there's something in your past that makes you think God doesn't love you? You're wrong. Is there a failure, a sin, a heartache, a disappointment that makes you feel as if God doesn't value you? You're wrong. Maybe you feel as if you're too old, or too young, too uneducated, too average, or too untalented for God use you in some way to do His will. You are wrong. Christmas is all about the ordinary person, because Jesus came for ordinary people. Jesus died for you and me despite the fact that we don't deserve His generous love and grace. Here's a second truth from the Magnificat.

CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE NEEDY PERSON.

Mary sang here, "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands." (Lk. 1:53 NLT) When I use the word "needy" am I talking about people who are literally poor or spiritually poor? There is such a thing as spiritual poverty spiritually speaking. What's that? It's about being "poor in spirit." It simply means you recognize before God that you're needy at all times and in every way. You know you're always in His debt and always will be. You know you can't bestow lasting joy or peace upon yourself. You know you can't infuse your own life with the meaning and purpose it needs for the long haul of life. You can't forgive you own sins. You can't give yourself eternal life. You can't earn or deserve a relationship with God. Instead, all you can do is throw yourself upon God and His mercy and grace every day that you live. You

acknowledge your need for God is continual and perpetual. Before Him, you are - and always will be – needy. Spiritual poverty is good and wholesome.

But there's another aspect of being needy we can't overlook. Mary was probably literally poor by any standard of measurement. Many of the first Christians were literally or economically poor. Many people in the lower classes of that day – slaves, for example – were the first ones to embrace the good news about Jesus. Many people in developing countries today where the Christian faith is growing by leaps and bounds are economically poor. A truth emerges from Scripture we dare not ignore or overlook. God is on the side of those who are poor, disadvantaged, and who lack economic opportunity. He just is. Both the OT and the NT underline this truth. "If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord – and he will repay you." (Prov. 19:17 NLT) "Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." (Jam. 1:27 MSG)

This isn't about glorifying poverty for poverty's sake. This isn't to suggest you should become poor to somehow please God more. This isn't giving into the the illusion that helping a poor person is always going to change someone's life. No, instead this is about making sure we are on God's side. And God is clearly on the side of those who are literally poor and lack opportunity in this world. I just want to be on God's side wherever and whatever that happens to be. For whatever reason, God has a special place in His great heart for those who struggle economically and are in need. At the very least, I think that means we look for ways as a church and also personally to serve the poor right here in this community and around the world. This isn't about replacing sharing the good news about Jesus with meeting the needs of poor people. We don't need to do just one or the other. God's people understand the value of both and they go about doing both because that's what God wants us to do.

There may be some folk here today who are really struggling financially. Whether you can be classified as being poor, I don't know, but perhaps you often have a great anxiety overwhelm you about getting just your basic needs met. I want you to know God is on your side. The Magnificat is one place where His Word says that. He will provide. I don't know how, but He will make a way where there seems to be no way. And to the rest of us today who have enough and likely more than enough, let's remember we're entering a season where there's no shortage of opportunities to reach out in loving and practical ways to needy people both inside and outside this church family. There are two opportunities our church is offering that you can participate in. One is our Thanksgiving/Christmas offering which is being designated for several countries around the world where there is significant need. Another one is inviting our men to deliver Christmas boxes to needy individuals on Saturday, December 18, as a part of Operation Pure Religion with the Center of Hope. The Magnificat reminds us that serving the poor is more than just a nice "Christmasy" thing to do. It's a way of saying to God, "Heavenly Father, I'm on your side." Part and parcel of following Jesus is

feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless. Christmas is for the needy person – needy spiritually and needy literally – because Jesus came for needy people. Here’s a third truth from the Magnificat.

CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE HUMBLE PERSON.

Humility is another sweet melody we hear in the Magnificat. “His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble.” (Lk. 1:51-52 NLT) Do you know what is the worst sin of all? Pride. It’s the sin that’s at the core of every other sin large or small. You name it – murder, adultery, fraud, racism, gossip – they all get started because of that deadliest of spiritual cancer cells – pride. The devil became the devil because of pride. He wanted to be like God, and he still does. Pride is the underlying cause for any and every misery in our lives, our families, our office, our school, our nation, and our world. Pride feeds into every other kind of sin.

Wouldn’t it be great if pride just got zapped forever the moment we put our trust in Jesus and were born again? Instead, we can fall prey to maybe the worst kind of pride – spiritual pride. Jesus was able to tolerate and be patient with just about every kind of sin except one. He simply couldn’t stomach the spiritual pride of the Pharisees and other religious leaders who became His enemies. Why? As long as you’re proud, you can’t really know or love God. You know you’ve been in God’s presence authentically when you’re overwhelmed by His bigness, His holiness, and His significance. When that happens, you can’t help but come face to face with your smallness, your uncleanness, and your insignificance. That revelation can be uncomfortable, to say the least, but it’s necessary if you want to really know God. In addition, proud people aren’t just wrong with God. Inevitably, they’re wrong with other people, too. Pride has a way of damaging every relationship it touches.

God wants to work humility into your life and mine. How do you know when He’s doing that? True humility isn’t some kind of groveling, sniveling sort of thing. Instead, it means coming to God and before God with empty hands each and every day and throwing ourselves completely on His grace and mercy. It means living every day on the basis what He’s done for you rather than on the basis of what you think you’ve done for Him. One clear cut evidence of humility is a profoundly and consistently grateful heart attitude. Here we are about a week and a half from Thanksgiving Day. Humble people are thankful 365 days a year. You just can’t quite get over what God has done for you. You remain in awe of God and what He’s done for you all of your life. And that grateful attitude changes how you relate to other people, too, of course. You no longer waste any spiritual precious energy feeling either judgmental about or superior to anyone else. You’re just so grateful God loves you, has accepted you, and has forgiven your faults and failings eternally. Christmas is a yearly reminder that you and I were in such desperate need that God had to send a baby to save us. That baby was the One of whom Mary said – none other than the Lord Jesus Christ – her Son and our Savior. Christmas is for the humble person, because Jesus came for humble people.

Popular author, Lee Strobel, tells a compelling story from his days before he became a follower of Jesus. At the time he was working as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune. Spiritually, he was an atheist. He was assigned to report on the struggles of a poor, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. The first time he met the Delgados – 60-year-old Perfecta and her two granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny – he was amazed at their lack of possessions. They'd just been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny, two room apartment. No furniture. No rugs. No pictures. Just a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That was it. In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half mile to school through the biting cold of a Chicago winter, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then take it off and hand it to her shivering sister who would wear it the rest of the way to school. But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced God hadn't abandoned them. No despair. No self-pity. Just a gentle expression of hope and peace.

Lee finished his article and it ran in the paper. But he found his thoughts returning often to the Delgados and their unflinching belief in God's goodness. The irony of it all wasn't lost on him. Here was a family that had nothing but faith and yet seemed happy, while he had everything he needed materially, but lacked faith. Inside, Lee Strobel felt as empty and barren as the Delgados apartment. On Christmas Eve – a slow news day – he decided to pay the Delgados a visit. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Several people who had read his article had responded to the family's need in an overwhelming fashion. New furniture. New rugs. New appliances. A large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents. Bags of food. A large selection of winter clothes. A generous amount of cash had also been donated.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Lee Strobel the most. It was the Delgados' response to all those gifts. Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When Lee asked Perfecta why, she said, "Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do." Lee asked her about the generosity of the people who had sent all these gifts. Perfecta responded, "This is wonderful. This is very good. We did nothing to deserve this – it's a gift from God. But it's not His greatest gift. We celebrate that tomorrow (Christmas Day). That gift is Jesus." That day, Lee Strobel says, he saw Jesus in Perfecta and her granddaughters.

Christmas is for the ordinary person. Christmas is for the needy person. Christmas is for the humble person. And, yes, when you find those kinds of people, you find Jesus living in and through them.