

What are you looking for to make this Christmas a perfect Christmas? What is it that you're eagerly anticipating this Christmas? Of course, we all have hopes and dreams for Christmas. Some of us look forward to unique and magical moments with family and friends. Some of us anticipate moments of real joy and pleasure that come from parties, dinners, traditions, and gifts that only Christmas time can muster. I think we all envision Hallmark movie moments, simple pleasures of family reunions, restored relationships, happy endings, and deeper connections with the people we love.

But what inevitably happens? This season brings to most of us higher levels of stress, busyness, and disappointments, which reminds us life isn't as perfect as we hoped. There are always those moments when the kids melt down and descend into chaos. There is always one family member who seems to bring up the one topic of conversation that makes everyone feel awkward or angry or both. There is a sense of loneliness and loss, which sneaks up on us and surprises us, even though we are around lots of people. There is always a sense of disappointment, which comes when Christmas time has actually gone; or we can feel sad and more tired instead of happy. And then there is the tagline that goes with any toy we get for the kids: "Some assembly required."

While hoping for a Hallmark movie moment come to life, we inevitably end up in a scene that would be better suited for National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. The gap between our expectations of the perfect Christmas and the reality of it all triggers some profound and honest questions about Christmas. What is the real hope to be found in Christmas? What part of our participation in this Christmas season actually helps us find a place of personal joy? What part of our participation in Christmas helps us take joy to the people around us? What part of our participation in Christmas helps bring joy to the world?

And here is the ironic thing. Questions about joy. Questions about this tension gap between expectations and reality are the very questions people were asking and wrestling with on the very first Christmas.

The real question is this: What difference does Christmas make? Besides tinsel, lights, gifts, parties, and some time off, what makes a picture-perfect Christmas? Two weeks ago, we talked

about hope. Last week, we talked about peace, and today we ask, "How can I live in a place of joy this Christmas?"

The best way to find an answer to the question, "How can I live in a place of joy this Christmas?" comes from a poor, unwed, pregnant, teenage girl visited by an angel who interrupted her life. Last week, Sandy spoke about this encounter, and we were drawn into her story about how her fear was turned into faith, and her anxiety turned into acceptance. We were drawn into how everything that surrounded her pregnancy and the direction of her life, what was known and what was unknown, was put to rest because an angel appeared to this young girl and said, "Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God. Mary God's grace is on you."

The irony was Mary being a pregnant unmarried young girl was about to make her very un-favored to her community. And God reminded her through the angel's visit, not just once but twice, "Mary you are highly favored. Mary, I know you are thinking of all people to be highly favored, you wonder why you, a humble peasant girl should be favored by the Almighty? That I am approved? That I am accepted? That I am blessed?" And Mary pondered these things in her heart.

Philip Yancey said this about God working in Mary's life, and the principle applies to us as well, "Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy, and great pain, and Mary embraced them both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of personal cost."

So, we are right to ponder these things in our heart and think that Mary, the soon-to-be-mother of Jesus, had a unique and helpful perspective on our Christmas today and a unique and helpful perspective on Christmas joy today.

As Mary pondered these things in her heart, what came forth from her heart was a song, a joyful song. It's recorded in Luke chapter 1 beginning in verse 46. It's one of the most famous songs in history. It's been given the title, "The Magnificat" because it is the Latin translation of "magnifies," which is the very thing Mary led within this song and wanted to do in response to God at the thought of Christmas.

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. Luke 1: 46-48a

Mary is saying, "At the thought of who God is and what he has done, my response is to glorify or literally magnify, continually and habitually magnify the Lord." From deep down in her soul, Mary welled up with happiness, excitement, and gratitude to God. Why? Because Mary perceived God had reached down to her to do great things for her. Mary knew who she was in the world. She was a nobody. She was an unwed, engaged, teenager living in a world where age and marital status mattered and where being a man mattered. And not only that, she lived in the sticks, scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to influence and prominence.

Mary wasn't used to being noticed, let alone being visited by a distinguished angel, or being given an important assignment from an angel. God had visited her to do something great for her that she didn't deserve. Christ coming to earth was very personal to her. As Christ's coming was uniquely personal to her, it is also to be deeply personal for us as well. Look at where she goes next in her song.

**From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name. vv. 48b-49**

Mary is saying, "I may be insignificant, but God is powerful and chooses to do mighty things for me, who is the least and most humble. And Holy is his name; he is stamping these great things with his name, reputation, and character.

Christmas was deeply and profoundly personal to Mary and Mary got that it was to become deeply and profoundly personal to all generations who followed. What is the real difference that Christmas makes? And how do we find that place of joy? We remember just as God did something great for Mary, He also did something great for us too. As he noticed Mary, he noticed us. We are not forgotten. We are not ignored; we are not invisible to God.

He sent Jesus Christ, the "Emmanuel, God with Us" to each one of us. God sent Jesus at Christmas to you and to me to do good things for you and for me when we didn't deserve it. The mighty one, the great and ultimate ruler of the universe, our creator who fashioned us in our mother's womb, extended himself personally to us. He entered our broken world to be like us, so we might become God's son or daughter through faith in Jesus, the one he sent for us. That is the difference Christmas makes for us personally. And that is why we can find the place of joy at Christmas.

We are compelled to join in with Mary and magnify God and His Son Jesus during this advent season. To thank him for initiating something good that we didn't deserve or earn. Mary's example compels us to magnify Jesus and arrange our lives around Him. And by doing so, we then diminish all these other things we have arranged our lives around on the Peninsula.

The true meaning of Christmas is that despite all the imperfect things that surround us at Christmas:

We can live in a place of joy because God is personal.

Mary's song was personal, but it is also global. God turned the world upside down with Christ's coming. There are two sides of this coin in how she sees that Christ's coming is a display of the mighty one. Look at verse 50.

**His mercy extends to those who fear him, from
generation to generation. v. 50**

He extends his mercy to those in every generation who are humble before him. The word mercy comes from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means God extends his mercy in the form of extending his love and faithfulness to generation after generation of people across the world, who put their trust in God and receive Jesus, God's Son. I love Chris Tomlin's song "Noel."

**"Noel, Noel, come and see what God has done.
Noel, Noel, the story of amazing love. The light of
the world given for us."**

That's one side of the coin. Here is the flip side, Mary also saw how God uses his mighty strength to send Christ to confront the powers and wealth that are used to suppress. He comes for the humble, but he comes against the proud.

**He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he
has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts. Luke vv. 50-51**

When I researched Mary's song, I discovered in the 1980s the government of Guatemala outlawed the Magnificat. People were not permitted to read or speak Mary's song in public because it was so threatening to those in power. If the poor began to believe someone noticed them and if they began to imagine a society that was just, in which dignity was restored, and people were cared for, they would have a revolution on their hands.

Imagine what King Herod would have done if he heard these words from little Mary.

**He has brought down rulers from their thrones but
has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry
with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
vv. 52-53**

This was dangerous stuff to whisper let alone sing at the top of her lungs. Christmas was about God sticking it to the man. Mary is belting out that God's justice was initiated with Christ's coming. He vindicates the humble, feeds the hungry, and confronts the proud and rich.

There is something subversive about Christmas. Think about some of the most famous Christmas stories such as A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. The rich and powerful scrooge was miserable until he was brought to his knees by Christmas ghosts while the poor and humble Bob Cratchit had true joy.

How about Rudolph? The poor little misfit couldn't even join reindeer games let alone earn a place on Santa's team. But an unexpected storm turned his disability into an asset, and he became the hero.

And how about all the Who's in Whoville? The Grinch thinks he ruined their Christmas, by stealing all their stuff, but they turned the tables on him when they woke up and sang with joy anyway. Next thing we see is Grinch carving the roast beast.

And how about Good ole Charlie Brown? Everyone told him he had to have the big, electric tree and flashy pageant. But he refused to go along and bought the saddest tree in the lot. With the help of Linus and Luke chapter 2, he discovered the true meaning of Christmas and was filled with joy. Mary told us the birth of Christ overthrew the established order. He turned things upside down. And we can bank on it.

Did you notice the verb tenses in verses 52-53? They don't read like future tenses. There is no "I wish and wish for justice" in Mary's song. She saw the vision of God's reversal of injustice coming through Jesus so clearly that Mary belted out this portion of her song in past tense. Greek professors call this a prophetic past, which speaks about the future outcome of things with such certainty that it's appropriate to describe it in past tense like it's already happened. Mary is saying to us; you can bank on it. God makes things right. The humble will be lifted up. The hungry will be fed. The proud will be brought down, and the rich will be emptied. Why is Mary so sure? Because she knows God sent His Son to install him as the King of Kings.

I doubt she knew at this time that her son would use his authority as King to lay down his life on a cross. Through his gruesome death, he would pay the penalty of our sin so God's justice would be satisfied for all who trust in Christ and accept his sacrifice as the atonement for their sins. And every succeeding generation, who receives the Good News of Jesus, needs to remember that despite what they see around them or what is happening to them, the arrival of Jesus is Good News and a reason for joy.

And this good news of who God is and what he has done for us compels us to share it in our neighborhoods and across the globe. When we think about how far Jesus had to go to give us justice, which we didn't deserve, and forgive our sins, we are compelled as followers of Jesus to give our neighbors glimpses of justice in the here and now. Our message of who Jesus is and what he has done for us communicates well when we engage our culture and become the hands and feet of Jesus on the peninsula and across the globe.

The purpose of our Christmas Outreach Offering, and our Share the Warmth Clothing drive, and our ongoing work to fight against homelessness, human trafficking, against hunger, and to fight for those who are marginalized for whatever reason is

to take Mary's message that Jesus came at Christmas to make things right.

Let none of us misunderstand this Christmas that just because God's total justice is delayed doesn't mean God's justice will be denied. God's total justice was initiated at Jesus' arrival, and God continues to sort it all out and reverse all injustice. One day this reversal of injustice will be complete. This we can bank on.

The true meaning of Christmas is that despite all the imperfect things, which bring sorrow and suffering at Christmas:

We can live in a place of joy because God makes things right

And here is how Mary ends her song. It ends on a high note because she reminds us that going back thousands of years, God promised his people he'd send the Messiah. He always had the plan. And when times were especially hard and sinful, God would lift their eyes to the time when the Messiah would come as the healer to make everything right. Whether the times were good or bad, God wanted them to put their hope beyond their situation to the coming Messiah. They waited and waited, but this Messiah never seemed to come. That is until this unwed pregnant teenage girl was revealed as part of God's plan for all humanity; this teenage girl who sings about God making good on his promises.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." vv. 54-55

The true meaning of Christmas is that despite all the imperfect things, which brings sorrow and suffering that surround us at Christmas:

We can live in a place of joy because God keeps his promises

Mary's sang her story of what God has done and will do. She overcame her fears by clinging to the promises of God. She stepped out in faith and said "yes" to God because she took God seriously. She could sing her story from a place of joy even when hardships came because she took God's promises seriously.

We are challenged by Mary's song to tell our own stories of our fears, and our anxieties of saying "yes to God," and to tell our stories from a place of joy because Jesus came at Christmas. And our joy springs from the reminder that Jesus is personally engaged to meet us where we are this morning, Jesus is personally committed to making things right in our lives and in our world, and Jesus is personally committed to keeping the promises that were made thousands of years before the first Christmas.

We all have stories. Good stories. Stories to tell each other at Christmas when hard moments come. As Philip Yancey said,

"Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and Mary embraced them both."

We heard Mary's song of joy. May God's spirit move in each one of us so we might recognize the place of joy this morning. The message of Christ is good news of great joy for all the people. In the town of Bethlehem, a savior has been born, he is Christ the Lord, and he shall reign for evermore.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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