
“How We Celebrate Christmas”

Luke 1:39-56

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(Luke 1:39-56)

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Core Idea: Mary shows that we celebrate Christmas with the community of God, by singing all that He has done for us, and by proclaiming this great news to the world.

Opposing Value: We are often distracted by the things that the world promotes during Christmas season.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon church. Though we can’t meet in person, I pray that the power of the Word will be felt over the screen. As you know, we’ve been going through the Gospel of Luke in this season of Advent. Now, here’s an interesting thought: did you know that God hasn’t *mandated* we celebrate Advent, Christmas, or even Easter? Nowhere in the Bible does it command us to celebrate these occasions.

Then why do we celebrate Advent? **We celebrate not because it's an obligation, but because it's an opportunity** – an opportunity to slow down from our busyness, to meditate on the true meaning of Christmas, and to cherish Christ as the greatest treasure of our hearts as we wait in hope. In light of this pandemic, someone commented, “It just doesn't *feel* like Christmas.” It's true that because of this lockdown, Christmas won't look the same this year, but we must remember that Christmas is never about seasonal excitement that comes and goes; the joy we experience must lead to permanent transformation and continual worship for our beautiful Savior. Then this year may be the perfect opportunity for us to do just that – instead of being distracted by the things that often rob us of this wonder of the gospel story, I invite you to turn your gaze to Christ today.

Last week, we read that Mary received the gospel with great faith. She went from saying, “*How will this be*” to “*May it be*.” Of course, this didn't mean that everything made sense to her. But she still surrendered because she believed in two things about God: His power and His promise. This is incredible if you understand the implications. She was about to get married to Joseph. If she shows up pregnant, who knows what kind of life will await her? Her life could be ruined. Her dreams and expectations must be abandoned. But she still chose to humbly submit. And her astonishing faith teaches us that **Christianity is not a negotiation but a surrender**. Mary wasn't calculating to see if this could add value to her life or if this could somehow help her achieve her greatest dreams; she simply entrusted herself to God. And God invites us to do the same this Christmas: to humbly surrender though our lives may turn upside down because we trust His power and promise.

Now, today's passage will tell us *how* Mary responded to this news which is how *we* should celebrate Christmas as well. **A special word to the parents:** in a culture that uses this season to get children to dream about how their lives would be by possessing certain *things*, it's vital to draw the wonder of our children away from the next great toy and toward the coming of our great Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Intentionally teach them the true meaning of Christmas over the dinner table or as you decorate your Christmas tree so that they too will celebrate for the right reasons. I pray that you won't miss this opportunity to plant seeds of true faith in their hearts. With that said, if you have your Bibles, please turn to Luke 1:39-56. Keep your Bibles open as I share so that you may see the truth for yourself.

[Read Luke 1:39-56]

We learn three ways of celebrating Christmas from Mary's life:

- **WITH YOUR COMMUNITY**
- **BY SINGING ABOUT YOUR SALVATION**
- **BY PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS**

1) **CELEBRATE WITH YOUR COMMUNITY**

Even though Mary received this news with faith, she must have had a lot of questions. “Did this really happen? What does this mean? How will I know? What will I say to Joseph? How will the people in the village look at me? What if this was just a dream?” As she wrestled with these questions, she remembered that Gabriel mentioned something about how her relative, Elizabeth, though she was unable to conceive, was now pregnant, because of God's mercy. Mary must have thought, “Elizabeth may be able to help me understand what just happened.”

So, verse 39 tells us that she visited Elizabeth *immediately*. Now, as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, verse 41 tells us that she was filled with the Holy Spirit and was able to discern that Mary's baby was the Messiah the whole Israelites have been waiting for. And she began to bless Mary and the baby in verse 42. This is incredible. Remember that Elizabeth's pregnancy was a miracle as well. She could've been eager to tell Mary about what *she* experienced and how precious John is to *her*; but for her, it was all about *Jesus*. Now, why did Luke record this? Because Elizabeth's words and reaction helped Mary to make sense of what was going on. Elizabeth's humility struck Mary powerfully and it helped Mary to finally grasp the weightiness of this reality. Everything that Mary was pondering about now clicked for her, her joy intensified, which is why she burst out in a song in verse 46.

What do we learn from this? **We learn that we need community in our faith journey because it deepens our understanding of God, strengthens our faith, and intensifies our joy for the Lord.** Even though Mary received the gospel with faith, Mary didn't really see it at first. But she doesn't try to make sense of this on her own; she enters fellowship with another person which is how she begins to see it. This was no ordinary encounter; just two family members hanging out. These women individually had a vibrant relationship with God and when they came together, their faith deepened tremendously. This is the pattern we see throughout the Bible. Moses encouraged Joshua. Naomi was comforted through Ruth. David was rebuked by Nathan. Elijah mentored Elisha. The disciples were transformed by Jesus. Peter was humbled by Paul. Paul was emboldened by the believers. No Christian is an island. The Bible repeatedly shows how God matures people's faith and deepens their intimacy with God through other believers. Bonhoeffer says in his book *Life Together*, "The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and His work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity."

Then, if you want to deepen your relationship with God and intensify your joy for the Lord this Christmas, I invite you to celebrate with a community of God. **Thank God for the people you do life together** – those who encourage you, comfort you, support you, guide you and even rebuke you to strengthen your faith in the Lord. **Show your love to them.** Write them a card to show your gratitude and share the joy of Christmas. Find ways to serve them if they're in need. Comfort them if they're grieving and rejoice with them if they're celebrating. If they're non-believers, love them through gifts as you remind them of the greatest gift from God. **But most importantly, spend meaningful time with them.** I understand that this lockdown has made this very difficult. But I pray that this won't stop you from doing life with them. I'm not saying break all the rules, but do it through a phone call, a video call, email, text... it doesn't matter *how*. Intentionally connect with them this Christmas to remind each other of the true reason for this celebration. Pray for each other. Share a Bible verse or how God has ministered to you and don't miss out on the opportunity to grow deeper in your faith and joy *together*.

2) CELEBRATE BY SINGING ABOUT YOUR SALVATION

Verse 46 starts by saying, "And Mary said..." but the scholars agree that it was more like Mary was singing. She was overwhelmed by what she heard and witnessed from Elizabeth that she burst out in a song. Then what does Mary sing about? Verses 46-49 show that the song is intensely personal.

It's all about what God did for *her*. "**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. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.**" She understood that she had nothing to boast about. There was nothing in her that made her more honorable or admirable than others. She knew that she was a great sinner and God had all the reasons to reject her. **Yet in His mercy, this Almighty God was mindful of her.** Not only was she noticed by God, but she was also given this awesome privilege and responsibility of being the mother of the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world. She knew that she was blessed and lifted solely because of His grace. And she sang about the way God saved *her*.

Brothers and sisters, this too is how we should celebrate Christmas: **by singing and recounting how this unbelievable gospel story is for me.** Christmas is one of the most glorious moments in history: when God became man. Paul described it this way in Philippians 2:6: Jesus, "*being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*" Jesus is the sum and definition of glory, the culmination of all the promises and prophecies in the OT; He is the reason why all things exist and have life; He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the King of kings, the Lord of lords which is why at the name of Jesus every knee should bow; yet this holy and magnificent God *willingly* emptied Himself of everything He had and was born in a manger as a helpless babe for *you* and *me*. Jesus was willing to submit to the Father's will, willing to serve when He deserved to be served, willing to endure rejection and gross injustice, willing to die for His enemies all because of His love for *you* and *me* – so that we would not be without hope; so that we would not be under the curse of sin; so that we may have life and life to the full.

Christmas isn't just a feel-good story that we recall seasonally; it's incredibly-shocking, deeply-loving, yet intensely-wonderful – but most importantly, it's radically-transformative and profoundly-personal as this astonishing story is written for *you* and *me*. Then let me ask you: when's the last Christmas you thought this way? When's the last Christmas you sang like Mary? Mary was amazed by the fact that though she was a sinner, because of God's grace, she has been saved and given this tremendous position and honor. Do *you* believe that you're a sinner yet also holy and blameless because of what Christ did for you? The King of kings came as a babe in a manger for *you* – to save *you*; to honor *you*.

Then here's a practical way of singing and recounting your salvation this Christmas: **write or edit your personal testimony and share with someone.** Reflect on how God saved you personally and share that joy with another believer or non-believer as you praise God together. Now, I want to remind you that our stories don't need to be dramatic to be engaging. Remember, we're telling *God's* story in the context of *our* story. The climax of our testimony is always the work of Christ which makes our personal story come alive as well. So, share with confidence not because of what *you* experienced, but because of the amazing thing God has done in your life through Jesus Christ. This is how we can celebrate this Christmas more meaningfully.

3) CELEBRATE BY PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS

When we read through verses 50-55, we notice that the rest of Mary's song is completely focused on God. "*His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but [He] has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but [He] has sent the rich away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as He promised our ancestors.*" She sings about all that God will do through this Messiah.

It's hard to grasp this today but these words would've been immensely life-giving to the Jewish audience. Let's put this into perspective. We must remember that God was silent for 400 years. Since the completion of the last book in the OT (Malachi), God hasn't spoken to them audibly, through a prophet, or through an angel. The Israelites were left waiting – feeling forgotten, forsaken. Then suddenly, God speaks to this young girl named Mary by telling her that He's here to finally and completely fulfill the promise given to Abraham. What was the promise? Let me read from Genesis 22:16 when God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. This is what God promised, "*I swear by myself that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and **through your offspring** [singular] all nations on earth will be blessed.*" She was proclaiming this good news to the world that the time has come when God will bless *all* nations through this offspring – the coming Messiah.

Now, let me just share three things that make this news really *good*: **first, because it's certain.** Isn't it interesting to note that Mary sings all this in the past tense? She doesn't say, "He *will* do this and that," but she says, "He *did* this and that." How is this possible when Jesus wasn't even born yet? It's because Mary knew that what God promised is as good as done. God *always* finishes what He begins. And when God promised that the Messiah will come through her and will accomplish all these things, she firmly believed that "*no word from God will ever fail*" (Lk. 1:37).

Second, it's good because it's the beginning of a great reversal and renewal. In this world, the rich are admired while the poor are despised. The proud will move up while the humble are trampled upon. The kings are protected while the slaves are abused. But the world ruled by the coming Messiah will be the exact opposite. If you're mighty, God will disarm you; if you're weak, God's mighty arm will rescue you. If you're lifted up, God will knock you down; but if you're humble, He will lift you up. This is not to wipe out the powerful just so that the lowly can achieve the position of honor and privilege. **But it's so that no one may boast before God.** In other words, the gospel is not that God shows His favor to the good and scatters the bad; it's that those who know they're bad come in and those who think they're good don't. **It highlights God's power and grace.** And this will be accomplished through God, who is high becomes low, and Mary, who is lowly becomes blessed.

Third, it's good because it's available for everyone who remains humble. Verse 50 tells us that this blessing wasn't just for the Israelites, but it was being extended to *everyone* who feared God, who humbly worshipped and were in awe of God, from generation to generation.

This is true because **humility gets God's attention**. God says in Isaiah 66:2, "*These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.*" Listen to how pastor C.J. Mahaney defines humility: "honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness." It's about seeing ourselves rightly in light of our holy God. In other words, to walk in humility is to understand where I fall short and where He does not and living in the confidence of that – a glad recognition that He is greater than I am, wiser than I am, more glorious than I am, more powerful than I am, more gracious than I'll ever be. The implication is that you don't have to have it all – you don't have to be rich, respected, or complete to receive this life – you just need to humble yourself. Brothers and sisters, this news is incredibly good. Then how can we keep this to ourselves? The world must know. That's what Mary is doing here. And Christmas is time for us to proclaim this song to the world.

APPLICATION

Then I want to celebrate Christmas by first proclaiming this great news to those who have yet to give their lives to Jesus; those who aren't sure if it's really worth giving your life to Jesus; those who have never sung Mary's song in their hearts. Friends, the message of Christmas is that God's promise is being fulfilled. The wait is finally over. God has entered our world. We get to meet the King of kings, Lord of lords, the only One who can satisfy our empty souls, but in order to receive Him, we must first humbly recognize that we are all sinners before God. We have all "*sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3:23). Now, the Bible tells us that God cannot tolerate any sins, small or big, because He is absolutely perfect. In His holy presence, we all deserve His wrath. But God didn't leave us in this misery, hopelessly abandoned; rather He chose to *intervene* by giving us the greatest yet most costly gift ever. As Mary sang, He extended His mercy and has done great things for us by sending His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, who lived a life we could never have lived, died the death that you and I deserved to die, but would rise from His tomb to overcome death so that we may be forgiven and enjoy this eternal life with our holy, loving, gracious Father in heaven.

Then I want to invite you to turn to Jesus right now; because without Him, you'll never have fellowship with God. Your life will be hopeless and meaningless. You'll continue to search but you will never find. Friends, I don't say this with a hint of condemnation or judgment. No, it's actually the opposite. I say this with a humble and broken heart knowing that I too was in this darkness until God in His infinite loving wisdom rescued me through Jesus Christ. He really *is* all that you need, and He *will* satisfy your soul in a way that this world cannot. I pray that with the help of the Holy Spirit, you will do just that – that you will surrender to God and receive this life in Jesus Christ today – and join us in singing this song together.

For the believers, I invite you to join me in proclaiming this Christmas story to the world. I believe that this is a timely truth for us as we enter another lockdown. Did you realize that we've been in this pandemic for ten months already? Think about all the things you had to do to adjust to this new life. As I called many of you during this time, in the midst of all these adjustments, there was a common thing that people experienced – many were uncomfortable by these changes, but I noticed that things have changed. Today, many have learned to settle down to this new lifestyle – they got used to it. People realized that it was more convenient to work from home and never having to fight their way through traffic. They weren't *that* bothered by the fact that they were spending more time on entertainment, social media, or games.

They didn't mind the fact that they didn't have the opportunities to do life with others. And many of them continued to justify their lack of spiritual discipline. Friends, does this describe you today? Do you see yourself becoming better at compartmentalizing your faith from the rest of your life? Do you rationalize your lack of passion for God by saying there's nothing you could do about it? If this is you, I invite you to open your heart and mind to hear the story of Christmas again. Jesus Christ came for you and me so that we can have life and life to the full. Then let me remind you of the words that Jesus shared before He ascended into heaven: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matt. 28:18-20). Brothers and sisters, we're called to proclaim. Have we forgotten our call? I understand that this has become harder to obey with this lockdown; but it's not impossible. Let us continue to fight the good fight. Let us not make any more excuses. The world needs to hear this news. Then I invite you to sing this song to those around you because of this rich and deep love you have for the Lord. This is how we should celebrate Christmas.

CONCLUSION

Mary shows that we should celebrate Christmas *with* the community of God, by *singing* all that He has done for us, and by *proclaiming* this great news to the world. Brothers and sisters, Christmas is a window into God's very heart. In this broken and hopeless world, God desires to extend His mercy and grace. Then let us sing this song of joy knowing that all that He promised is yes and amen in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.