

The Songs of Christmas – Mary’s Song
December 11, 2011 - Luke 1:39-56

Living in St. Albert can be a great hindrance to our Christian lives. Living in this area can put a great obstacle in receiving from God all He has for us in Jesus. Oh, there’s nothing particularly evil about St. Albert. There are lots of wonderful privileges we enjoy living in this city. It’s a place much like many other suburban areas in Canada and across North America. So how can living here be an obstacle to receiving from God?

Many of us have so much. So much stuff; so many opportunities; so much we can do; so many places we can go; so much that we see little real need for a Gospel or God’s help unless our family faces some serious illness or crisis. If life is generally good, we can struggle to receive from God. And Christmas can become just another holiday season. Do we really need God and His Gospel while we live in the St. Albert area?

When Jesus began His public ministry, He read these words from the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*”

To us, these words may sound good at first. But we might conclude they don’t have much to do with our lives. Or if we really think about these from a middle to upper middle class perspective, they might be more disturbing rather than comforting. Good news to the poor – well most people living in St. Albert don’t live below the poverty line. So this is good news for others – maybe some of those people down by the Mustard Seed – but if they just worked harder they wouldn’t be poor. Freedom for the prisoners? Why would we want to proclaim freedom for prisoners who did something wrong and likely deserve to be in prison? Recovery of sight to the blind – that’s good if we know someone who’s blind but what if we don’t? Release of the oppressed – okay that’s good. So somehow the Lord is going to release us from the oppression we feel when we have to wait in traffic an extra 15 minutes. Or see “Go Oilers Go” signs. That’s oppressive to me. Or when we get behind someone in line at Tim Horton’s who doesn’t know what they want when they get to the front of the line. Jesus must save me from the oppression. If we approach the Gospel from a comfortable middle to upper middle class perspective, it might not really be that dramatic or necessary unless we go through some crisis or face death.

But for the people of the first century, the Gospel brought incredible hope. Why? There was an immense gap between rich and poor. The rich got rich at the expense of the poor. Herod the “Great” was only great because he oversaw some

great buildings – the temple mount; Masada, the palace Herodium. But he funded these through the enforced taxation of the poor. Slaves or children of those indebted to Herod built these projects. The people feared his soldiers. On top of Herod, there were the Roman occupiers. They ran Palestine like many other of their conquered provinces. The Romans ruled and the Jews served. A Roman soldier could pick any Jew off the street and command them to carry their luggage for a mile. The Romans crucified people who threatened Caesar. The Jews faced oppression every time they went out on the street or every time they heard the sound of horses approaching their village.

One person living in these conditions was a young girl named Mary. She was likely 12-14 years old living in the poor little village called Nazareth. For her family and most of her countrymen, the need for deliverance was plainly obvious. Survival was a question mark every day. They lived in a semi-perpetual state of anxiety – Would Herod’s soldiers come and take their grain? Would robbers steal their meager savings? Would the Romans tax them further and take their land or children for compensation?

They had no power to reverse this reality. There was no voting; no middle class. A few were rich. The vast majority were poor who lived at the mercy and cruelty of those in power. So to preach good news to the poor meant people who lived with perpetually bad news finally had good news. To proclaim freedom for the prisoners meant release for some of their family members who were in prison because they stole food or owed a debt. Recovery of the sight for the blind meant people who never could afford a doctor might actually get some treatment. And “release from oppression.” That would mean a lifting of the greatest burden of their lives.

God did act on behalf of these people. But in a way even they did not expect. He chose to bring a deliverer to them through this Mary who seemed to have everything against her. She was poor and from a backwards region of the country. She had no education and was a girl; an unmarried one at that. She had no status in that society. Yet the Lord chose her to continue His work of deliverance.

Upon thinking about what God was doing, Mary composed a song. Hers is the first of four that we find in the Christmas story. So for the remainder of the Christmas season, we are going to look at these songs of Christmas to help us keep focused on what this Christmas season is all about.

Today, through her song, we will be invited to **Join Mary in celebrating God’s upside down plan of salvation.** Today, I want you to see 2 reasons why God’s plan is upside down or unexpected. As we discover those reasons, we’ll

discover how we can respond to God's upside down plan. In these responses, we will find out how even we who live with so much stuff can embrace the reality of our spiritual poverty and our desperate need for God.

Luke 1:39-56 ESV

Mary Visits Elizabeth

[39] In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, [40] and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. [41] And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, [42] and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! [43] And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? [44] For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. [45] And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

[46] And Mary said,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
 [47] and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 [48] for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 [49] for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 [50] And his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 [51] He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
 [52] he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
 [53] he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.
 [54] He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 [55] as he spoke to our fathers,
 to Abraham and to his offspring forever."
 [56] And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

After the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will carry God's son, Mary leaves to go visit her relative Elizabeth. It's a long journey from Galilee to the hill country of Judea taking four or five days. She arrives and enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah still can't talk (and we'll learn why next week). But Mary greets pregnant aged Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child in her womb leaps. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She proclaims a blessing upon Mary in a loud voice: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.*

Then Mary says her song. Many have asked if Mary could really have come up with this? She was uneducated and couldn't read. Yet here seems to be a masterful piece of poetry. Yet we must remember that in ancient times, people had a great ability to absorb and remember the spoken word. There was a lot less distraction then. She would have had days to think about this on her journey. She may have been thinking about the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Later we're told that she was a girl who reflected deeply. Mary pondered things in her heart. On top of all this, poverty and lack of education does not rule out creativity. There are many strong reasons to conclude that Mary composed this song celebrating God's upside down plan of salvation.

So why is God's plan of salvation upside down?

Reason #1 - God pays close attention to the humble and those who fear Him. (46-50) In that culture, you didn't pay attention to the poor. You didn't take note of them. They were supposed to make way when the proud important people came on the street. But God paid attention to the humble.

Mary begins by celebrating God's close attention to her personal, humble circumstances. She marvels that God has chosen to work through an ordinary girl like her to bring salvation to her people. She begins by magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in God her Savior. The word translated "magnify" is "megalinei" in Greek meaning to enlarge or mega size the greatness of the Lord. She is glorifying God's greatness as she ponders what He's doing. Notice she magnifies God HER savior. Mary is not sinless. She needs salvation. She recognizes her need. She realizes she was a sinner like others.

Why does she magnify the Lord? Because he has regarded her or looked upon her humble estate – her lowly position in her culture, her country and the world. This young girl is going to play a key role in God's saving work. Generations will call her blessed. She will become more famous than Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. She is blessed because the Mighty One has done great things for a humble one. She celebrates that God has reached down into her life to bring this blessing to her and to the world. . She sees in this work the Holiness of the Lord. Holy is God's name. In those days, a person's name not only identified the person but described a person's character. So it's not just that God's *name* is holy but He *Himself* is holy.

Yet holiness implies separation. To be holy is to be set apart unto God. God Himself is set apart from all that is unclean which immediately creates a distance between us and Him. Yet Mary reminds us that not only is God holy. He is merciful. Verse 50 – "And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." Mercy is undeserved

favor. Our God demonstrates His heart of mercy through sending Jesus to sacrifice Himself so that we might receive mercy.

Mary teaches us through her circumstances and song that God pays close attention to the humble and those who fear Him. If you find yourself in a pretty humble state or messy situation today, you can be sure God is watching over you. In fact, Christian, God is not just watching over you, He regards your state. He's in your state. It's not like God just woke up to your problem and is now trying to figure out how to bring good out of it. He's been in it since the beginning. He's working out His good purposes in your life and others far beyond what you can see. So don't judge by appearances. Trust the Sovereign God for your good. God watches out for those in a humble, distressing situation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps us see God's perspective in this. He was a German pastor and theologian during the Second World War. He resisted the Nazis and was eventually hanged by them. He gave an Advent message based on this passage while serving a church in London, England in 1933. "God is not ashamed to be with those of humble state. He goes into the midst of it all, chooses one person to be His instrument, does His miracle there, where one least expects it. He loves the lost, the forgotten, the insignificant, the outcasts, the weak, and the broken. Where men say "lost," he says "found;" where men say, "condemned," he says "redeemed;" where men say "no," he says "yes." Where men look with indifference or superiority, he looks with burning love, such as nowhere else is to be found. Where men say "contemptible!" God cries, "blessed."

But some of us have that problem that we began with today. We live in a community that can make it harder to be humble or realize our humble, desperate state when it comes to spiritual things. Because we have so much we can begin to think much of ourselves; too much, or think we don't need much of God. **So we must cultivate, nurture, develop, foster, encourage and promote an attitude of humility and a healthy fear of God in our own lives and our family's life.** Humility is a healthy God centered view of ourselves. We bear God's image. We're created by the Creator and given life with which to glorify Him. Yet we are also sinners in need of a savior and in need of continual shaping and refining.

Friends, what are you doing to nurture humility in your life?

You won't learn it from our culture. You will rarely discover it in the movies or in political leaders or in sports stars. But you will find it in Mary and ultimately in Jesus "who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even

death on a cross.” Mary celebrates God’s upside down plan of salvation where He pays close attention to those who humble themselves and walk in reverence before Him.

But there is another piece in God’s upside down salvation plan. Why is God’s plan upside down?

Reason 2 - God brings down the proud and lifts up the humble. (51-55) Verses 51-53 describe several ways God does this. Verse 51 is amazing. “He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their heart.” Now most people look down on those who are outwardly proud. Most people relish when a braggart fails to accomplish his boasts. Most of us do not act like that. Yet, in the depths of our hearts, prideful thoughts can find refuge. “I’m better than they are. I deserve it more than they do. I’m entitled to recognition. I’m dressed better than they are. Can’t they see how unmatched their clothes are? We drive a nicer car than they do. We are a better family than they are.” All kinds of prideful thoughts find refuge in our minds.

What does Mary say about that? God stretches out His arm (always a picture of the Lord’s strength) and scatters the proud in the thoughts of their heart. That doesn’t sound good for the person harboring proud thoughts. I don’t think I can win the battle of God stretching out his arm and scattering my proud thoughts. “God opposes the proud.” It’s not a place we want to be.

Verse 52 reveals another way God’s salvation is upside down. – He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. So this talks about kings and rulers who will be brought down while the oppressed humble people would be raised up. Herod the “Great’s” reign of terror lasted 41 years. He made so many enemies during his lifetime that he kept his burial location a secret. He feared opponents would desecrate his grave. So when the end finally came, he was buried in a secret location of Herodium compound. But the opponents found it and dug up his body. The mighty oppressor had fallen. But the child he pursued with soldiers after the wise man’s news rose to be King of Kings. His reign will never end.

Verse 53 - He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty. In the ancient world, it was accepted that the rich would be cared for and the poor would be sent away hungry. There was no social services network; no equal access to health care. The rich bought their way to first in line when food became scarce and the poor were left to starve. But Mary sings of a God who is not bound by what people do. He turns human attitudes and

orders of society upside down. In God's kingdom the poor are filled up while the rich come away empty. So God puts down the mighty and the rich, exalting the lowly and poor in their place.

How do we live in light of that? **We must adopt God's heart to those "lower" than us.** Bonhoeffer writes this –
"To prepare for Christmas, we must prepare ourselves by getting rid of something which plays a great role in our lives. We must be clear about how, in the face of the manger, we shall think about what is high and what is low in human life.

Everyone one of us lives side by side with some whom we call great, and some whom we call low. Every one of us has someone who is below us. Is it possible that this Christmas we could rethink this radical point, learning and knowing that God's way leads us not to the high and mighty, but really into the depths, to the humble and poor? And that every way of life, which is only a way up higher must end in disaster?

God is not mocked. It is not a light thing to God that every year we celebrate Christmas and do not take it seriously. His word holds and is certain. When he comes in his glory and power into the world in the manger, he will put down the mighty from their seats, unless ultimately they repent.

My brothers and sisters how do we view those "lower" than us in life? Do we look down on them or get down with them?

I don't know what challenges you face in this area. But I can share with you the challenge we pastors face when viewing those higher or lower than us. When someone finds out I am a pastor, they usually follow up that discovery with 2 questions. "At what church?" is question #1. What do you think question 2 might be? How many people attend your church? – To which I respond, it is not my church – it is Christ's church. Often the size of the church impacts how people view you as a pastor.

So now I can say "I serve a church that is pushing 400 on any Sunday morning." "Okay so your 400. So you're a pretty good pastor. It's anyone's guess what people think after that." But I used to serve a church that would celebrate if we broke 100 on Sunday morning. I remember being the pastor of a church that size. I remember looking up to pastors of larger churches. I remember the silence that followed when I said "we have about 75 people on Sunday." Some were very gracious and helpful. From others I sensed a kind of condescending attitude.

Now, I'm in a different category. It is amazing how tempting it is to look down at pastors who serve smaller churches. Yet I dare not do that. God joined with those who were lower than Him. I can only pastor and continue in

the pastorate by the grace of God. It is the Lord who gives grace for me to live and to enjoy salvation and the grace to even work at the capacity required for a church this size. So I must join with other pastor whether they are supposedly lower or higher than I am.

Or sometimes men, we can look down on our kids – we’ve been dealing with big projects at work and we provide for them and they have to complain about computer time – we can’t believe that they’re bothering us with something so minor after we’ve been dealing with something so major. But unless we have faith like a child, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. There is much more to learn from a child than an all-day seminar.

Or working spouse – we can sometimes come home and hear our spouse express the reality of struggle with the kid’s cold or a broken down vacuum or the draft in one of the rooms or not knowing what to get Aunt Brunhilde for Christmas. We might think “I can’t believe they’re telling me this when I’ve just been through some major meeting at work or I’ve been working on some project that will have major implications for a lot of people. Yet God chose to be with the humble to reach out to the poor. He chose a 12-14 year old girl from the country to give birth to and parent Jesus.

Students – who is lower than you at school, in your class, on your team or in the church youth group? What is your attitude towards them? Do you spend more time trying to get ahead or get in with a crowd that you think is cool? Do you spend most of your time trying to keep your cool crowd cool? Or do you look around for those who are not “cool” and look to what you can learn from them. God calls us to be a people that shows no concern for status but much concern for salvation. We are called to join with those who are supposedly lower who can help us see our own lowness compared to the Lord.

Mary sang about God’s upside down plan of salvation. He pays close attention to the humble and those who fear Him. He brings down the proud and lifts up the humble. Today, we are invited to join her to **Experience and celebrate God’s upside down plan of salvation.**

God meant for us to experience His deep love through this salvation. Will you experience this and celebrate it today? Some of you have never come to the manger to actually worship the King. Because Jesus is not your King. You never received Him as Lord and Savior. You never have accepted that He provided a way for you to enter into a restored relationship with God Almighty. No matter how high or low we seem in this culture, we must all come and bow to the

King if we ever want to relate to God as Savior rather than as Holy Judge. God does not receive us based on our status in the community or how many good deeds we have done. He receives the humble and those who fear him, showing mercy to them. We must confess or declare that Jesus Christ is Lord in the world and over our lives and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead. We must not only affirm facts. We must personally come to Jesus, turn away from our sins and turn towards Him as Lord and Savior. He will come into our lives. God will declare us not guilty forever based on Jesus' sacrifice. We begin that wonderful journey of walking with God our Savior who looks on the humble realities of our lives. You can make that decision today to receive Christ as Savior and Lord and mark this Christmas as the most significant turning point in your life.

Some of us maybe once declared that Christ is King. We walked closely with Him. But lately we've wandered. We've maybe let pride creep into the thoughts of our hearts. Or we've thought of ourselves as mighty and scorned those lower than us. Or maybe we think that we've done something that's so horrible that Jesus won't receive us back. Jesus received the thief on the cross who had no opportunity to make things right. Jesus comes to the humble and those who know their sinners to rescue them. So today, come back to the Lord and declare that Jesus is King of our lives and we want to enter again with that humble walk before Him. Will you declare anew that Christ is your king and you will walk before Him with humility and reverent fear?

Bonhoeffer writes, "Who of us would want to celebrate Christmas correctly? Who will finally lay at the manger all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all pride, and all selfishness? Who is content to be lowly and to let God alone be high? Who sees the glory of God in the humble state of the child in the manger? Who says with Mary: "The Lord has been mindful of my humble state. My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior?" I pray you will join Mary and your brothers and sisters by answering I will.