

“Luke’s Christmas Carols: Magnificat”
Luke 1:26-56

December 8, 2013

SI: Today we are beginning a short sermon series that will take us through the remaining four Sundays of December.

We are going to study the four songs found in the first two chapters of Luke. Four songs connected to the birth of Jesus Christ.

These four songs are known traditionally by their Latin names.

Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria In Excelsis, and Nunc Dimittis. Each of those Latin names come from key words in the songs.

This morning we will look at the Magnificat, which is the song Mary sang when she met her cousin Elizabeth and they talked about the children they were expecting.

The word “magnificat” means means magnify or glorify.

It comes from the first line when Mary says:

My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

Mary’s song starts in verse 46, but going to start in verse 26 for context.

INTRO: Have you ever noticed that the British don't say Merry Christmas—
they say Happy Christmas/

In the Harry Potter books and movies,
the characters say Happy Christmas.

When the Queen gives her annual Christmas address,
she wishes her subjects a Happy Christmas.

So why do the British say Happy Christmas instead of Merry Christmas?

Well, they used to say Merry Christmas.

That was the oldest, traditional English Christmas greeting.

But in England, the meaning of the word merry changed over time.

It used to mean happy or pleasant, but it changed to mean tipsy.

To have a merry party means that there is a good bit of drinking going on.

So most folks, the queen included, didn't want that connotation.

They didn't want to be wishing people a tipsy Christmas—

so they started saying Happy Christmas,

which is closer to what Merry Christmas used to mean.

In America, we've continued to say Merry Christmas because for us,
the word merry doesn't have the connotations of drinking or being tipsy.
For us it's still an old fashioned way of saying pleasant or happy.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year mean just about the same thing.

In the Magnificat, Christmas and happiness are put together for the first time.

It's near the beginning, verse 48, when Mary says:

“From now on all generations will call me blessed . . .”

This word “blessed” doesn't mean honored or praised.

There is another word for that.

Mary not saying: All generations will call me honored or praiseworthy.

Blessed was the highest Greek word for happy.

It was used to speak of the happy life that a person can only find in heaven.

Not happiness that comes and goes with changes of circumstances and emotions.

But a happiness that lasts. A happiness that transcends circumstances.

Just before Mary speaks of being blessed she says:

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Joy, biblically speaking, is a deep sense that all is well, all is right.

So it would be accurate to translate Mary's words:

From now on, all generations will call me supremely happy.

Isn't that what everybody wants? Doesn't everybody want to be supremely happy?
The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said:

“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

Everyone is seeking happiness. It is the great big hole in the heart of every person.
So how is that hole filled? Where does lasting happiness come from?

According to Mary, her blessedness, her great happiness came from Christmas.
She burst into song because God had chosen her to bear the Messiah,
who would be the Savior and the source of true happiness in the world.
The prospect of his birth filled her with great joy.

Even though Mary was a unique person in the history of redemption.
Even though she alone was chosen to be the mother of Christ.
Her song is preserved for us in Scripture to show us the way to happiness.
The blessed life is through Christ, whose birth we celebrate.

It is no secret that many people are not happy at Christmas.
If you aren't happy in ordinary times, the holidays can make things worse.
Your losses, your failures, the pains of the past are more poignant at Christmas.
The holiday trappings—the shopping, the festivity, the merriment (English sense),
those things can help for a bit. They can take your mind off things.
But deep down you don't feel blessed, you feel miserable.

The problem is that most people, look for happiness in the wrong places—
even at Christmastime.

Basically, there are two places people look for happiness:
Some say you look inside for happiness. It's a matter of attitude.
Others say you look outside for happiness. It's matter of circumstances.

Both will fail to deliver true happiness.
Mary's song presents a totally different way—happiness only possible
through God our Savior and his Son who came at Christmas.

So let's look at her song more carefully—
will do so by contrasting it with these two places most people look for happiness.

MP#1 Happiness Comes From Inside

Many people think happiness comes from inside.

Happiness is a matter of your attitude.

It's all about how you perceive yourself and how you talk to yourself.

Love yourself, be good to yourself—that's where you find happiness.

There are a number of ways this view of happiness is expressed,
but the most obvious is in the emphasis on self-esteem.

The theory is people are unhappy because they don't think highly of themselves.

If you want to be happy, you must work on building your self-esteem.

Because you have it in you to make yourself happy.

It just takes a proper view of yourself.

If you want to have a deep and lasting happiness that won't be shaken by what happens to you and won't be shaken by what other people say about you then this is what must do.

You have to believe in yourself.

It's the message of every children's movie made in America for the past thirty years. Are you misunderstood, bullied, socially awkward, uncool—believe in yourself and you will find a happiness that people can't take away.

We would be foolish to say it doesn't work.

Building your self-esteem and believing in yourself can change people's lives, help them achieve things and make them happier than they would otherwise be.

A number of years ago I had an interesting conversation with a woman who was a top Wal-Mart executive. She started out loading trucks at the distribution center. She got that job after going through a bitter divorce from a man who denigrated her, and told her she was worthless.

She was desperately unhappy after the divorce. She felt she was worthless.

But then she began to believe in herself and that was when things turned around.

She worked her way up the ladder and 20 years later she was much better off than her ex-husband, whose life had fallen apart.

She said she was happy, and I had no reason to doubt that. She would know.

But there seemed to be an emptiness deep down. It was her alone against world. I couldn't help admiring her success story but I remember being struck by the fact that she attributed nothing at all to God. It was all the result of her self-esteem.

That's the problem with finding happiness by believing in yourself—
it's spiritually bankrupt.

It's idolatry. It's worshipping yourself.

It's seeking happiness from a created thing rather than the Creator.

Idolatry often does give short-term results. If it didn't, it wouldn't be tempting.

But believing in yourself never brings lasting happiness.

The Bible says that those who worship idols will be like them.

That means if you try to fill your emptiness by worshipping your empty self,
then eventually you will become more empty, doubly empty.

What was Mary's self-image?

Did she believe in herself?

Did she say: I'm a cute little Jewish gal with a ton of self-esteem? No, she said:

For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

She considered herself humble, lowly. She knew she didn't have it in herself.

If Mary didn't find happiness in herself, where did she find it?

In the grace of God extended to her.

Do you remember greeting of angel? "Greetings you who are highly favored."

Mary knew that the favor of God, the grace of God, had been poured out on her.

And that was her real source of self worth. That was her real identity.

Her happiness was knowing that God's undeserved favor rested on her—
and that he had sent his Son to her.

Grace meant that the child she was carrying not only her son, her Savior.

And as Elizabeth pointed out—Mary was happy—

because she believed what the Lord had said to her.

She had a realistic understanding of her sinfulness and need for God to save her.

Her happiness came from knowing she needed him and that she was the object
of his grace and affection.

We often recite the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism in worship:

What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong, body and soul . . .

It's a very famous catechism question and response.

But listen to the second question:

How many things must you know that you may live and die in the happiness of this comfort?

Two. The greatness of my sin and wretchedness,

and how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences by grace.

That's what Mary knew, that's what she believed.

That has nothing to do with looking inward for happiness—
rests completely on looking at God's grace to you in Christ.

How does this apply to daily life?

Let's say your child is unhappy. He or she is having a tough time.

Perhaps troubles at school, troubles with other children, fears of various kinds.
The world would say: Tell her to believe in herself.

Build his self esteem. Help him think highly of himself.

He has the capacity for happiness within—tap into that.

Don't tell your child that lie. Tell her the Gospel. Tell him the Christmas story.

Tell him that God has come to help lowly people who know they need Him.
Tell her the Lord knows she is in a low, sad, unhappy place—
and that's exactly where the Lord will come and help her.

Tell him that he has been favored by God, not because he's got it in him—
but because of God's great love.

Explain to her that God has shown his delight by allowing her to be born into a
Christian family, and by putting her in a good church, and by giving her faith.

Tell her God promises to pour out blessings on generations of those who believe.

As Mary says:

His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

Challenge him to believe those things as Mary did.

As his faith in God his Savior grows, real joy will take root in life.

May be small, may be shaken—but it will be based on something solid—
not on something fake like self-esteem.

Preach the Gospel to yourself—good news that Mary sang about.

That your own sin and misery is worse than you could ever know—
but that God has been mindful of your humble state.

That is the source of real happiness—God's grace to you in Christ.

That brings us to the second way the Gospel challenges the world's
search for happiness.

MP#2 Happiness Comes From Outside

Some people say happiness comes from outside.

It's a matter of your possessions.

It's a matter of your accomplishments, comforts, power, relationships, money.

Obviously money and accomplishments do make life easier.

When you have money, your life opens up in pleasant ways.

You aren't squeezed, there are more options available.

That's true of all your other possessions as well.

They can open up your life in pleasant, useful ways.

They can take the edge off many difficulties in life.

Also, we would affirm that building and accumulating is the way God made us.

We are commanded to have dominion. In itself this drive is good.

So the problem is not with money, houses, academic degrees, relationships and whatever else people possess.

The problem is with the human heart—it's sinful and can't be satisfied.

Because it can't be satisfied, looking for blessedness in possessions dead end.

Did Mary find her happiness in possessions?

You know that the Gospels reveal in many details that she had Joseph had little. Now there is no virtue in being poor, just as there is no sin in being rich—the heart is what matters.

A poor person can trust possessions for happiness as much as a rich person.

But this song reveals Mary's heart. What did she believe would make her blessed?

She knew it would never be possessions of this life.

She sang about how temporary all of these things are. Starting in verse 51.

Proud—scattered. Rulers—brought down. Rich—sent away empty.

Mary was tapping into a great theme of the Old Testament—

Lord reverses fortunes. Over and over He does it.

He pulls down those who have much, and lifts those who have little.

He casts down mighty, wealthy Egypt, brings Israel out of slavery.

He destroys the proud Assyrian army in one night, lifts up his people.

He lifts up David out of the shepherd's field, throws down Saul in all his power.

Lord doesn't do this in every case.

There are proud, ungodly people who live easy lives and die rich and happy.

Psalm 73 talks about this reality. But death strips away all possessions.
And one hour in hell will burn up all happiness found apart from God.
But the Bible records enough stories of God reversing fortunes to bear witness
that true happiness can't be found in possessions.

If you strive and struggle to accumulate things because you think your
blessedness rests on those things—you may get them and you may not.
But even if you do—they will pass away. They will not bring eternal joy.
In time—in this life or next, Lord will reverse fortunes.

So if Mary did not find her joy in possessions—where did she find it?
She said: “He fills the hungry with good things.”
She saw the Lord himself as the provider of what is good.
Best thing he provide was the child she was carrying who was her Savior.
What she lacked in possessions, made up for in faith—because of that happy.

We all have our lists of what we think we must have to be happy.
Children have Christmas lists that they are eager to share.
But big people have lists too. But we mostly keep them to ourselves.
We think: If only I had this—I would have happiness.
What's your list? If only my husband were more sympathetic, understanding.
If only I had a husband.
If I could only achieve this financial success.
If only I could gain the admiration of those people.

You have to give that list to Lord and believe he fills the hungry with good things.
He knows what you need.
First thing you need is exactly what Mary needed—a Savior.
You need to be forgiven of all of your sins, you need a new life in Christ.
If you believe that—then all the other wants of life—fall into place.
When you pray can always be assured—will fill with good things.

This week I got a Christmas newsletter from the Reformed University Fellowship
chapter at University of Alabama. RUF campus ministry of our denomination.
This newsletter had an article written by a sophomore named Davie Boone—
a girl from Asheville, North Carolina.
It's quite long, but I want to read part of it to you because it's about a person
who looked very hard for happiness in things—
but over and over, she was disappointed.

Unlike the Wal-Mart woman I told you about, this one has a happy ending.

Emptiness. Empty is a pretty terrible feeling. I spent a majority of my time in high school filling my emptiness with things like friends, sports and boys. There was always a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach; nothing ever seemed to satisfy. I always thought that “If I just had this,” or “was dating so and so,” or “was friends with this person,” or “made that goal in practice, I would be happy.” And finally my senior year, I was faced with the cold hard facts: high school was ending, and everything that I had my identity wrapped up in was slowly slipping away.

I was in denial for a very long time about the conclusion of my high school career, all the way until I stood alone in my dorm room, having just said goodbye to my family. They were to head back home to North Carolina, while I was supposedly about to have the best four years of my life at the University of Alabama . . . All anyone ever said was, “You’ll love it! You make friends that will last a lifetime!” But for the first two months of college, I hated it, and my best friend was instant watch on Netflix. I felt I had left my glory days behind me, all my accomplishments, all my best friends, everyone who knew me back home, and alone in Lakeside West Room 201, I was unimportant and forgotten . . .

I joined a sorority in an effort to get plugged into campus, but was only met with forced smiles and forced conversations. I didn’t feel that I belonged there or anywhere else on campus . . . Well one thing led to another, I quit my sorority, and was seriously considering transferring schools, when my friend at the University of Chapel Hill suggested that I go to RUF. In my mind, I knew RUF was kind of like church. I didn’t go to church in high school, nor did I grow up in a Christian home. But at that point, I was willing to try anything. I vividly remember walking into a large group on a Wednesday night in late September. I was immediately asked my name, handed a nametag, and welcomed warmly by a few upperclassmen . . .

Finally we stood up to sing, and we sang a song I had never heard before, but I believe it was God speaking to me that night. We sang *Jesus, What A Friend For Sinners*. Tears began to stream down my cheeks and I could not stop the welling up of emotion. All of a sudden this beautiful truth hit me. At that very moment in my life when I had felt the most alone, God touched my heart and moved me to see that I am never alone. I just remember explaining to myself in my head, “He’s real! He’s real!” . . .

As the semester pressed on, I found so much peace in the truth of the Gospel. I had never heard the concept of grace preached before, and I fell in love with the idea . . . I also found happiness and joy and rest in the faith and the community, but I wasn’t convinced that I needed Jesus. Grace was beautiful to me, but I didn’t see my desperate need for it. Well, that all changed as I entered into my second semester of my freshman year. I came back after an emotionally turbulent Christmas break. A great deal of my own sin had been revealed to me in a short amount of time, and it had left me with a hurting heart . . . Second semester, I became very aware of my desperate need for Jesus. And grace was put on display for me every day through the actions of those (Christian friends I had met). I am so glad that Jesus is a friend to sinners

like me . . . I am so glad that not only do we have a never ending, free and abounding supply of grace gifted to us every day, but we also have relationships gifted to us . . . God is present in relationships, especially those I found in RUF. He used every tear I shed, every shoulder I cried on to draw me closer to him.

He used it all to make himself more beautiful to me than anything else in the world . . . For the first time in my life, I am full.

That's remarkable. Here is a young woman who grew up in a non-Christian home, who never darkened the door of a church, who had never heard of grace— but who does she sound like?

She sounds like Mary.

My soul glorifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

He has filled the hungry with good things.

And permeating her testimony is a sense of profound happiness.

Christmas and happiness go together.

Blessedness cannot be found in ourselves or in our possessions—

neither self-esteem nor the world's riches bring solid joys and lasting pleasures—

But there is someone who does—and it's his birth we celebrate.

Jesus Christ, the Son of Mary and the Son of God is indeed a friend of sinners.

He always gives grace to those who seek him—

and it is in him alone, that you will find the blessed and happy life.