

## **“Mary Christmas”**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, December 23, 2012**

### **Old Testament Lesson - Micah 5:2-5a New Testament Lesson – Luke 1:46-55**

There’s a story of a woman who was Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys, and hearing both her children asking for everything they saw, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids.

She was feeling what so many of us feel during the holiday season – overwhelming pressure. Party invitations, gotta taste all the holiday food and treats, finding that perfect gift for every single person, can’t forget anyone on the Christmas card list – Oh, and get those things in the mail! And then there’s the pressure of responding to everyone as their cards arrive – many of them on Christmas Eve day.

The woman was beside herself as she and the kids waited for the slowest elevator on the plant! Finally the doors opened *and* you guessed there was already a crowd inside. She pushed her way in and dragged her two kids in with her and all her purchases. When the doors closed, she couldn’t take it anymore and let out an exasperated plea: “Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot.” From the back of the elevator everyone heard a quiet, calm voice respond, “Don’t worry, we already crucified him.” For the rest of the trip down in the elevator, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

A crucified savior who came to us as a babe of lowly birth. Before we talk about Jesus’ birth, let’s talk about his cross, because, the two are related. The cross of Jesus signifies much more than Christ’s victory over death. It also symbolizes “an inversion of accepted norms.”

Writing in Newsweek magazine<sup>1</sup>, Kenneth Woodward notes that at the time of the early Christians – if not also today – suffering that is understood in light of the crucified Christ was noble rather than pathetic.

So how much more noble was Mary when she accepted God’s will that she was to carry a child conceived outside of marriage? Mary lived in a time when such a thing was punishable by death, by stoning. And if she did live, it would leave her and her baby social outcasts the rest of their lives? And even so, Mary not only accepts God’s will, she welcomes it – celebrates it, in spite of any hardships it might bring.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Woodward, Newsweek, “2,000 Years of Jesus,” March 29, 1999, 55-56.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,” says Mary, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

How many of us, when gripped by an uncertain future – economically, at our workplaces, with our families or loved ones, when facing health problems – how many of us, trying to make sense of any of this, actually put such trust in the Lord? And yet, Mary showed great faith in God’s wisdom and providence – faith that what made no sense to her made all the sense in the world to God.

Consider the following nonsensical turn of events. In the 1960s, Tokyo’s largest department store decided to have its first-ever Christmas display. On the first day of Advent, the management invited all the American VIPs living in the city to the department store. As the bigwigs gathered and the display was unveiled, there stood the biggest Santa they had ever seen ... nailed to a cross.<sup>2</sup> Not what God had planned in sending Jesus to us. And yet, consumerism, nailed to the cross, might not be such a bad thing. It might even be in keeping with God’s promise, as reflected in the words of Mary.

Mary says, He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.”

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we share in the promise that God speaks to us this day through Mary. First she says, “(God’s) mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.” To fear God is really to trust in God, and to pass that trusting relationship on to our children and our children’s children. Is this something we are doing as a society? And if not, why? And at what cost do we fail to pass along our faith in God?

Second, Mary says, “(God) has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

Is that what we see happening in our society? The proud being scattered, the powerful brought down, and the lowly lifted up?

Not typically.

Typically the proud get that way – and stay that way – because society rewards them for their great looks or sculpted bodies, their huge bank accounts or powerful jobs. We don’t typically see them brought down, and when we do, it’s seen as a tragedy, certainly by them and often by us, too. We see it as a sign of impending doom. The bottom drops out of the economy and we lose all faith. Congress gets gridlocked and we fear the worst.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on “Santa Crucified,” Christchurch Press, 1993, [www.urbanlegends.com](http://www.urbanlegends.com).

We don't sing praises and rely on God when facing struggles and uncertainty like Mary does. We don't show such confidence in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

And yet, as New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper says, "The joy of the mother (Mary), will be the job of the son (Jesus)." "Everything Mary includes in her joyful song," says Culpepper, "becomes a line in the job description of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus launches his ministry saying the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him "to bring good news to the poor" – Luke 4:18 – and he goes on to warn people about the danger of riches, saying, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" – Luke 12:15.

The more we focus on material possessions instead of spiritual prosperity, the harder it gets for us, in our society and our communities, in our churches and families. We struggle, because we don't trust that God has things under control – that somehow it's all part of God's plan. We just don't see that. And yet, here it is right in the Bible, spoken to us by Mary when she was a young girl.

The proud scattered, the powerful brought down; such things don't signal a crisis. They're God's promise, spoken of by Mary, as she celebrates the coming of the Messiah.

Now, it's not that there is anything wrong in the world, per se, or even with having success or being in a position of power. It's just that the world is so resistant to God's plan and promise, and the more success and power we have, the more resistant we can afford to be, relying on wealth instead of faith. The richer we are the more removed from reality we tend to become, and the more suffering we can inflict on others or withstand when facing it ourselves, until that is, God puts his foot down and we have to begin listening.

Mary continues, "The lowly (will be) lifted up; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

If these things are not happening – the lowly lifted up, the hungry fed, and the rich giving of their wealth – if this isn't happening, it's not because something's wrong with the world as God created it. It's because we as a society are fighting against God. And that's a battle we will never win.

We will always be suffering as long as we deny God's plan – as long as we fail to lift up the lowly, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, empower the disadvantaged, embrace the outsider, forgive the trespasser, love the hater.

So that's our challenge, to embody Christ in our day-to-day lives, just as faithfully as Mary embody the Christ child in her heart, and soul, and flesh.

And as long as we fail to do so – as a society, as workplaces and schoolrooms, as individuals and families – as long as we fail to embody the spirit and teachings of Christ, we will struggle in this world of ours. Because we exist outside of God’s plan.

But thank God that God did not leave us to suffer in our brokenness and insufficiency. We may struggle, but we don’t have to suffer despair because God sent us a Savior. For those who take Christ into their hearts, even as imperfectly as we do, for those who claim our spiritual ancestry through Jesus. God has sent us a Savior.

And as if to underscore just what type of Savior we have, just what type of salvation we can expect, God sends Jesus as a little baby, born to common villagers, with little money and no power, and no connections in society. The powerful decision-makers of this world are not our salvation, at least not apart from God.

Jesus Christ is our salvation. Jesus Christ has overcome all manner of struggle in this world. There is nothing so low, no place so lonely, no fear so powerful and no discomfort so unbearable that it can not be overcome by God working in your life – working in our lives – Christ born in our hearts and soul and flesh through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is the blessing we receive and celebrate on Christmas. And those of us who find ourselves struggling through the holidays because of the pressure, because of awkward family conflicts, because of meager resources compared to our more extravagant desires or society’s unrealistic expectations – for those of us who struggle in any way at Christmastime, we do so because we’ve forgotten what Christmas is all about. The first Christmas, first celebrated by a young girl named Mary.

This is “Mary’s Christmas” – M-A-R-Y apostrophe S. Not “Davy’s Christmas” or “Yuri’s Christmas” or “Billy’s Christmas,” but Mary’s Christmas.

So, I wish you all a Mary Christmas – M-A-R-Y. I wish you a Christmas received with humility, faith, and trust. A Christmas that knows, expects and accepts the hardships of life, and still we celebrate the blessings of God.

A Christmas in which we stop fixating at what’s going wrong in this world, and start focusing on what we can do to turn it around for the better. A Christmas that from now on has each of us looking for how God’s greater plan is being worked out, in our lives and in the world around us.

And in that, we all have a reason to expect a very Merry and Joyful Christmas – M-E-R-R-Y!

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Like Mary, let our souls magnify the Lord and let us kneel before the cradle in thanksgiving. Bethlehem beckons and we come reverently with open hearts as we prepare to greet the babe and receive the gift of love given to us that we might have life and have it abundantly.

We rejoice, O God, at the mystery and the miracle of Christmas, at the light shining in our darkness, a light that no dread of war, no pain of human suffering, no cloud of despair can dim or put out. By that light, we pray, lead us from the tangle of our bewildered ways, from the shadows of fear, from the thickets of strife, to set our feet on the clear paths of peace, confidence and righteousness that lead to your kingdom.

We pray all this in the name of the Christ, who came as a child and is the fullness of your glory and presence in our world; Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.