

I want to make my annual public service announcement...CHRISTMAS EVE IS COMING SOON. If you are a procrastinator --it's time to do your Christmas shopping. I hope our men have this task already out of the way. But just in case, please heed my announcement.

I read a story about a certain couple that slipped off to a nearby city to do their Christmas shopping and somehow they got separated for several hours. Fortunately they had their cell phones with them. "Honey, where are you!?" the woman asked. "Darling," he says, "do you remember when we were first married the jewelry shop where you saw that diamond necklace you loved? But we didn't have enough money at the time, so I said, 'Someday I'll come back to this shop and buy that necklace for you.' Do you remember?" "Yes!" she shouts, excitedly.

"Well," "I'm in the Home Depot next door to that jewelry shop getting some supplies."

THE BIG DAY IS ALMOST HERE. We have experienced another exhausting Advent season. So many things required our attention. BIG THINGS THAT CAN DISTRACT US FROM THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD.

Our lesson from Luke's Gospel takes place some months before the birth of Christ. In fact, Mary has only recently learned from the angel that she will bear a child, a child conceived of the Holy Spirit. Almost immediately, Mary decides to visit her older cousin Elizabeth. This meant she had to travel about 100 miles south to the hill country of Judah. This would be about a five day journey, an amazing trip for a young teenage pregnant girl. It's disconcerting to realize that Mary would have been in about the 9th, maybe the 10th grade when all this happened to her.

Perhaps the awkwardness of her situation played a role in her decision to visit her cousin. After all, for having a child out of wedlock, she could be stoned for adultery. At the very least, she could be rejected by Joseph, her parents, her village. She could spend the rest of her days in poverty, struggling to keep herself and her child fed outside the safety of a marriage and community. **We accept an out-of-wedlock pregnancy much more casually today, but this would have been a big deal in biblical times.**

Elizabeth herself was married to a priest named Zechariah. Elizabeth was a descendant of the Hebrew people's first high priest, Aaron. They were a deeply religious couple. Luke describes them as being righteous. **Elizabeth was also pregnant for the first time.** She would also face ridicule. The source of Elizabeth's social torment, however, would be age. There would be those who would whisper to their friends, "Isn't she too old to have a baby?" Elizabeth was far beyond normal childbearing years, yet she was six months pregnant. In fact Gabriel came to her long before he came to Mary to announce her son's coming. Elizabeth's son was not divinely conceived any more than you and I were, but his birth was still significant. He would be the forerunner of the Messiah. We know him as John the Baptist.

Elizabeth and Mary were quite a pair. As Dr. M. Craig Barnes has noted, "One of them is too old to be a mother and the other is too young. But both are in the hands of God."

In that culture and at that time and place, it normally would have been appropriate for Mary to pay homage to the elder Elizabeth, but this is not a normal situation. Elizabeth, through the Spirit, recognized that she was in the presence of the mother of the Messiah. Luke tells us that as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. **So she praised Mary and pronounced her blessed.** In a loud voice she exclaimed: *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"*

That's interesting, don't you think? **Elizabeth's unborn son announced the coming of God's son.** Elizabeth asks with humility, *"But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"*

IN HER OWN WAY, ELIZABETH IS ASKING, "MARY DO YOU KNOW...WHAT THE LORD HAS PLANNED FOR YOU?"

At this Mary breaks out in a song, a song we know as, **"The Magnificat."** She sings, *"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 holy is his name. 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 has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but 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.”

Yes, Mary is very aware of God’s plans for her life!! The Magnificat echoes several Old Testament biblical passages, but the most pronounced allusion is to **the Song of Hannah, from 1Samuel 2:1-10**. The Magnificat is radical and revolutionary. The humble and the hungry are lifted up but the wealthy are sent away empty. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory.

In our land, Mary would be accused of “class warfare.” It’s dangerous to talk about the greed of the wealthy and powerful and the oppression of the least and lowest.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM “Mary’s Song?” Three things.

First off, we need to see that Jesus came to TURN THE WORLD RIGHT SIDE UP!

Jesus didn’t come to maintain the status quo. Jesus came to bring **RIGHTEOUSNESS & JUSTICE**. The message of God’s love for all people regardless of who they are or what they have is the most liberating message in the world.

Remember that the very first message the adult Jesus preached was based on the words of the prophet Isaiah and went something like this: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus was not a revolutionary. He was sent to be the Savior of the world. However, his message was revolutionary. Once you accept that God is the Father of all people, once you accept the fact that Christ died for all people, once you accept the fact that everyone on earth is our brother and our sister, it becomes impossible to justify the oppression of one people by another. It becomes impossible to justify that some would live in absolute luxury while others go to bed each night with hunger pangs gnawing at their insides. **Jesus came to turn the world right side up.**

The 2nd point we learn from Mary is: Jesus came to give dignity to those whom society does not value.

The Christmas story shows those in government palaces in the worst possible light. Meanwhile members of society’s least prestigious vocation, shepherds, hear the message of *“Peace on earth, good will toward men.”* That is no accident.

Dr. Craig Barnes, pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in our nation’s capital, tells of walking downtown several years ago. It is Christmas time and he was late for an appointment. He rushed past a small group of young teenagers who were singing carols on the sidewalk.

He should have kept running, he says, but for some reason he stopped for just a moment. It was then that he noticed a group of teenagers that were physically or emotionally challenged. One young lady with Down syndrome had the job of playing the triangle. Whenever the director pointed to her, her face would light up, she would smile from ear to ear, and give her triangle a whack. Barnes says he was riveted by her. He says she became his priest. As his eyes teared up something inside him leapt for joy. He noticed the stressed-out leaders of business and government around him who had also been captivated by this moment, dabbing their eyes. What was happening? He wondered. *“Something deep inside,” he writes, “something planted by God, was touched as they sang, ‘the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.’* That holy thing God had started leaped up to our hearts and every one of us wanted to join that group of singers saying, ‘I have challenges in my life too. My spirit and heart have been disabled by cynicism, hurt, and anger. I would love to have your innocence and purity leap out of me as it does your little choir.’”

It is only right that at Christmas we should be mindful of those for whom life is a struggle. It is only right at Christmas time that we should be reminded of our plenty and the world's need. Sometimes it seems that more show respect to wealth and less to God on Christ's Holy Day. Let me ask you, whose birthday is it anyhow? Jesus came to turn the world right side up. **Jesus came to give dignity to those whom society does not value.**

And the 3rd thing the song tells us is this...Jesus came to give HOPE TO THE HOPELESS & PEACE TO THOSE WHOSE HEARTS ARE IN TURMOIL, AND THOSE WHO NEED "LOVE" BECAUSE THEY ARE "BROKEN."

In "Family Circus" sometime back we see little Billy. He's spent the afternoon wandering through various stores where he's seen signs that say, "Don't forget Christmas Candy; don't forget wrapping paper, don't forget to visit Santa, don't forget last minute gifts."

Billy goes home and draws a picture of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and the star and writes on it simply, "DON'T FORGET!!!"

Among the things we will want to remember is the song the gentle maiden sang as she awaited the *birth of her son.*

For in her song about her son—God's Son, we hear about His mission to the world—A MISSION THAT CALLS ALL OF US TO CARE FOR THOSE IN OUR BROKEN WORLD.

We need to ask this day...HOW DID MARY KNOW? HOW DID SHE KNOW THAT Jesus came to turn the world right side up? That Jesus came to give dignity to those whom society did not value. That he came to give hope to the hopeless, peace to those whose hearts were in turmoil, love to those who were broken.

THE MESSAGE OF THIS DAY IS...

"Mary did you know, that Baby Jesus, would change the world?"

The Good News is he is still changing this world—and making it a better place for you and for me!!" Amen!