

“Simple Gifts”

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And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” (Luke 1:46b-55)

We move fairly seamlessly from a lowly drummer boy to a lowly peasant girl. This passage follows a miraculous visit that the angel Gabriel paid to Mary. “Greetings, favored one!,” the angel said. “The Lord is with you.”

Luke says that Mary was immediately confused by this strange greeting, that she was “much perplexed,” probably because she didn’t feel like someone who was favored, let alone favored by God.

Sensing her struggle, the angel said, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.”

Mary accepts the message, but it took her a while to process it. It was not until she visited her cousin Elizabeth, who senses that the Lord was doing something amazing through Mary. It was only then that Mary was able to see things clearly enough to offer this soliloquy, known through the ages as “The Song of Mary,” or more formally, the “Magnificat.” It’s beautiful poetry is an inspiring statement of faith, but its true power is found in its view of what the incarnation of Christ will mean for the world.

In order to understand that power, we have to remember that this statement is being made by a very modest, humble, simple person. Despite the elegant queen-like image we often see in paintings, the real Mary was a peasant girl from a peasant village in a country predominantly populated by peasants. Despite the years that separate us, her daily existence was not unlike that the subsistence lifestyle of people waking up this morning in little villages around the world -- in Latin America, Africa, and Asia – any city where rich and powerful people become richer at the expense of the poor... any town where most of the people would never consider themselves to be “favored” in much of anything.

From that vantage point, the radical nature of Mary’s song cannot be denied. Hers is a prophecy about the plan that God, through the child she will bear, will bring to fruition in the world – a plan that, in her words, will scatter the proud, bring down the rich and powerful, and lift up the lowly. As the famous theologian and political activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached in an Advent sermon 91 years



ago, *“The song of Mary... the oldest Advent hymn... is at once the most passionate, wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.”*¹

And I would add this. The song doesn't describe this revolution as something that will begin in the future. She says that these reversals exist in the very nature of God – that the things that will happen through her son are the same kinds of things that God has been doing consistently through history. So, when we see them happening again, we should know – like Mary now knew -- that we are watching the work of God unfold before our eyes.

Which brings us to a bit of advice that I offer freely to all of you, advice that is based on real world experience. When you are in a group of people, one of the scariest things you can hear a Southerner say is **“Hey, y'all. Watch this.”** Trust me on this one. If you are in a group of people -- a group of any size -- and you hear someone who sounds like me say that, you should immediately scan the room for emergency exits, because something crazy is about to go down. Whatever stunt that person is about to try could possibly work out, but probably not.

That is why I find it so interesting that God says this very thing all the time. This is a biblical truth. Time and time again, when God makes a promise, and that promise is questioned or doubted, God says, “OK. Just watch.”

“You don't think I can get the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt? Just wait and see what happens next.”

“You don't think I can provide you with food and water while you are wandering in the desert? Well, check this out.”

“You don't believe you can get into the Promised Land, because the fortified walls of Jericho will never be breached? Let me show you something.”

“You don't think one prophet of God standing alone can prevail over 450 priests of Baal? Elijah, do your thing.”

And here, in this morning's lesson...

“Hey world, you don't believe that God's chosen one, the Messiah, can be born of a lowly peasant girl from a nowhere family in a nowhere town? Hey y'all. Watch this!”

Before long, a faithful and trusting Mary is singing the same song. “I know it is difficult to see,” she says. “I know it is hard to believe that lowly people can be lifted up... that proud people can be humbled... that the world can become a place of peace, and light, and hope for all people. But just watch. Wait and see, because God has a beautiful surprise in store for us.”

The author Nancy Dahlberg once shared a true story from a Christmas a few years back. Her family had loved spending the holiday in San Francisco with her in laws, but because they both had to be back in Los Angeles for work on December 26th, she and her husband found themselves making the 400-mile drive home on

¹ <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/555/article/historical-mary#:~:text=Her%20daily%20life%20and%20labor,Mary's%20difficult%20life%20went%20unrecorded.>

Christmas Day. Anyone who has ever traveled with small children knows that a drive that would normally take 8 hours can take twice as long with kids in the car. When it became clear that their one-year-old son Erik needed a pit stop, they finally found a greasy spoon that was open and stopped there for lunch. As Nancy set Erik up in the one, not-so-safe-or-hygienic high chair in the place, she looked around the room and thought to herself, "What am I doing here?"

The restaurant was pretty empty. They were the only family in there. Everyone else was busy eating, but everything seemed out of place considering it was Christmas Day. Then out of the blue, Erik squealed with glee and said "Hi." He was pounding his little baby hands on the metal tray of the high chair with joy and excitement. When Nancy turned around to see what was making her son so happy, she couldn't stop a short gasp of fear.

Behind her was a man in a tattered, dirty, hand-me-down coat and worn baggy pants. His hair was unkempt and uncombed, his face badly in need of a shave, and his smile was as gummy as her 1-year old's. "I was too far away to smell him." Nancy said, "but I knew he smelled."

"Hi there baby!" the man said, waving his hands in the air. "Hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster!"

Nancy and her husband exchanged fearful glances. But Erik continued to laugh and joyfully answer, "Hi!" The exchange kept on, until they noticed the raised eyebrows on the waitresses. Several people from neighboring tables "ahemed" out loud. "This old geezer was creating a nuisance," Nancy said, "with *my* beautiful baby."

When their waitress brought their food to the table, they hoped the exchange would end. But it didn't.

"Do ya know patty cake?" The man was now yelling across the restaurant. "Do ya know peek-a-boo? Peek-a-boo, little fella!"

Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was clearly drunk, and he was causing a disturbance. They ate in silence, except for Erik, who was running through his entire cute-kid repertoire for his admiring audience.

Finally, Nancy had enough. She turned the high chair. But that just made Erik scream and clamor even more desperately to face his new buddy. Nancy's husband got up to pay the check, whispering as he left, "Get Erik and meet me in the parking lot."

Nancy wrestled Erik out of the high chair and began to walk toward the exit. Of course, she had to walk right by the old man to get out. "Lord," she prayed silently, "just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik."

But it soon became clear that both the Lord and Erik had other plans.

As she walked by, trying to leave the greatest possible amount of space between the man and her son, Erik used every ounce of his strength to throw his body toward the man, reaching out to him with both arms. The message was undeniable -- universal baby sign language for "Please pick me up."

Nancy's struggle to keep hold of her wriggling son brought her eye to eye with the poor man. And just as Erik had been able to express his wishes without words, the man's look clearly implored, "Will you please let me hold your baby?"

"There was no need for me to answer," Nancy said, "because at that moment

Erik propelled himself out my arms and into the man's."

The embrace that followed was consistent with everything that had already transpired. "Erik laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder," Nancy said. "The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, and pain, and hard labor--gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back."

Nancy stood awestruck and the old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms. When his eyes opened, he and set them squarely on Nancy's. In a firm and commanding voice, he said "You take care of this baby."

Somehow, despite the dry lump that rose in her throat, Nancy managed to say, "I will."

"God bless you ma'am," the man said as he handed Erik back to her. "You have given me my Christmas gift."

With Erik back in her arms, Nancy ran for the car. As she buckled Erik's car seat, she began to cry. Her husband asked her what was wrong, but all she could say, over and over again, was "God, please forgive me."²

It is unfortunate that the word "simple" has taken on some bad connotations over the years. To say that an idea is "simplistic" suggests that it lacks nuance or sophistication, that it is the product of inadequate analysis or lazy thinking. In the same way, a "simpleton" is someone foolish or gullible. But just because an idea is simple does not mean it is wrong or that it lacks value. As Winston Churchill once said, "All the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope."

That idea was very much present in the hearts and minds of the people who founded this country: Puritans searching for a simple life of freedom and faith... Quakers and their "testimony of simplicity," which professed their commitment to eliminating extraneous, distracting things from their lives so that they could focus their energy on what is most important.

But no group has held to these ideals with more faith and passion than the Shakers. In 1848, an elder in the Shaker faith by the name of Joseph Brackett composed a simple melody and simple lyrics to convey the simple but powerful vision of Shaker living. Thanks to Aaron Copland, who incorporated Brackett's theme into music for the ballet "Appalachian Spring," the tune of "Simple Gifts" has become an enduring part of the American consciousness. The original lyrics went like this:

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.*

² chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/wp-content/sermons/2013/2013-12-24%20Shawn%20Newton%20-%20Behold.pdf

The rum-pum-pum of a poor boy's drum. A peasant girl's bold song of faith. The joyful, loving purity of a baby's hug. All were and are simple gifts. But all the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word... love. A simple gift given in love can change the world.

Maybe that is why God has always chosen simple, lowly people to play the greatest roles in the story of faith. Maybe that is why God himself chose to become a simple, lowly person, born to a simple peasant woman in a simple, little-known place and laid to rest in the hay of a simple manger.

All of us struggle with faith from time to time. We human beings have a way of making things really complicated. But, at the end of the day, the story we will celebrate in two short days is not complicated at all. It is a simple gift of love, a gift that has changed the world and is still changing the world. And if you are having trouble accepting that gift or believing that it is real, that's OK, because God is used to that kind of doubt, God is not phased by thy kind of doubt, and God is already saying to you, in the face of that doubt, "Hey, y'all. Watch this."