

## Christmas Sunday: *Mary's Song*

Luke 1:39-56

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on December 22, 2013

### Introduction

- ❖ Spatial disorientation. That's the technical term when a pilot is flying a plane upside down without knowing it. It happens. A few years back there was an incident where an F15 fighter pilot crashed into the ocean during a training exercise off the Oregon coast. The way a fellow pilot described the crash is pretty scary. He said he watched helplessly as the pilot, who was totally conscious and looking up in his cockpit, made a controlled descent straight into the ocean. He thought he was flying right side up but he was totally upside down.
  
- ❖ That's a parable of human existence. **Humanity is flying at high-speeds, navigating through life, progressing forward, but all the while unaware that we're upside down.** We're headed for a crash. And it'll be quite a shock for many when it happens.
  - Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke through his prophets warning that we're flying upside down. But humanity, as a whole, has rejected their message. It's because God's Word calls us to live a life that feels upside down. It contradicts our values. It challenges our view of reality. So we reject it.
    - Yet what the Bible teaches really is right side up. It's teaching reality about the way the world really is. But when you're flying upside down, the Word of God makes no sense at all.
  
- ❖ Which is why he sent us his Son. In Jesus, God's Word became flesh (Jn. 1:14). Jesus is the embodiment of God's message. **By the way he lived and by what he taught, he proclaimed a revolutionary message – the news of a great cosmic inversion, a total reversal, where everything down is turned up and everything up is knocked down.**
  - Blessed are *not* the rich but you who are poor. Blessed are *not* the full but you who are hungry. Blessed are *not* you who are well but you who weep (Lk. 6:20-21). The blessed ones, the happy ones, the favored ones are the weak, the small, the lowly in this world. That's what Jesus taught. Does that make any sense?
  
- ❖ I understand if this seems off. Perhaps some of you are back in church after a long hiatus. For some this is all new. Or some of you have been here all along. But regardless of background, you're sitting here thinking the Christian faith makes little sense on a practical level.
  - *"I've heard the messages. I've tried to read the Bible. Yes, it's uplifting. It's inspiring. But in the end it's impractical. I don't think I can live like that. A life of servanthood? A life of sacrifice and putting others first? A life of obedience, submission, and self-restraint? Is that really for me? It's too foreign, too strange. It feels upside down."*
    - But here's my point: What if it makes perfect sense? ***What if Christianity is right side up and you're the one flying upside down unawares?***
  
- ❖ That's the point. Jesus didn't come to earth to introduce an alien concept, a foreign reality, a completely novel way of living. What he teaches about God, about what it means to be human, about who is truly blessed in this world – all corresponds to true reality.
  - It's right side up, but to see it (and believe it) we need to be turned around. We need to be converted (inverted). Thank God he came to do just that.

- ❖ Friends, this morning as we celebrate the events of the first Christmas, I want you to show you how even the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth are marked by these right side up realities. **The Christmas story sings the same tune – the song of a great inversion where everything down is turned up and everything up is knocked down.**
  - I want to show you three inversions in our text – three ways a certain baby boy born in Bethlehem has turned everything we know about reality right side up.

### **The Lowly are Looked Upon as Blessed**

- ❖ Look with me at this morning's passage. If you're familiar with Luke's Gospel, you know he's writing to a benefactor named Theophilus, trying to compile an accurate narrative of all that took place concerning Jesus of Nazareth (cf. 1:1-4).
  - So he begins with the birth narrative. Prior to our passage, an angel appears and says to Mary, "*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. . . . behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.*" This is a shock since she's still a virgin. She's betrothed to marry Joseph, but they have yet to be intimate. How will this be?
    - The angel explains, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.*" (1:28, 31, 35).
- ❖ Notice how Mary replies in v38, "*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*" That's impressive. She submits. *Let it be to me.* That takes courage because according to this angel's word, she's going to be an unwed mother. A teen mom. People are going to talk. Joseph will likely reject her. She'll never find a husband. **Her life is essentially ruined. Yet she submits to the Lord.** "*I'm your servant. Let it be to me.*"
  - Now our passage takes place right after that. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who's also with child. She'll bear the one we know as John the Baptist. There's this powerful moment where the prenatal John hears the voice of Mary – the mother of his Lord – and leaps in his own mother's womb. Elizabeth is then filled with the Spirit and with supernatural insight she proclaims Mary to be blessed. "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*" (v42)
- ❖ Remember who we're talking about here. We're talking about little Mary the teen mom. In a few months when her baby bump starts to show, she'll be the subject of village gossip. She'll become a town scandal. ***You're saying this social outcast will be blessed among women?***
  - Mary's no fool. She knows her place in society. She's well aware of her humble estate. She's not of noble birth. She's not wealthy or privileged. She's actually dirt poor. Later after Jesus is born, when she and Joseph go to the temple to sacrifice, it says they offer up two turtledoves. Look it up in the Law. That's what the poorest of the poor would give if they couldn't afford the prescribed lamb (cf. Lev. 12:18).
- ❖ **Mary's a nobody from Nazareth who's about to become a somebody but for all the wrong reasons.** She's about to become a scandal. And yet she is blessed among women. Mary gets it, and she gets that it's all because of this baby boy growing in her belly.

- ❖ This is our first inversion. **1) Because of this baby, those who are lowly are looked upon as blessed.** Look at how she puts it. Read vv46-48. This is traditionally called Mary's *Magnificat*. It comes from the Latin for magnify. "<sup>46</sup>My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed."
    - This a song about Mary. There are a lot references to *me* and *my*, but in the end it's really a song about how God looks upon and blesses anyone who, like Mary, fears him (v50) and believes there will be a fulfillment of every one of his promises (v45). This is her song but it can also be yours.
- ❖ But let's first see what we can learn about Mary. This is needed because I think most of us who grew up in **Protestant** churches have too little regard for Mary. We don't show her the honor she's due. It says here in v48 that from now on all generations will call her blessed. She's to be a model of courageous faith for all believers in every generation. That's a huge honor we shouldn't overlook.
    - But those who were raised **Catholic** have to take note of what she says in v47. She says her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. Sinless people who had immaculate conceptions don't need a Savior. Only sinners do. Mary's special. She's the mother of our Lord. But she's not perfect. She's still a sinner in need of grace and a Savior.
- ❖ **What we have in Mary's song is a song every believer can sing. This is the song of every Christian.** On one hand, I'm a sinner like Mary in need of grace, in need of a Savior. But at the same time, the Bible says I'm seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1). I'm counted righteous in his sight (Rom. 4:5)! This is the Christian's song. Mary gets it.
    - There's this wonder and amazement in her voice. That though I'm a nobody, though I'm poor and lowly, though I'm a sinner in need of Savior, yet God has taken notice of me and exalted me to this position of tremendous honor. My soul magnifies! My spirit rejoices! *Do you see this wonder that fills her?*
- ❖ Friends, if *you* being a Christian makes perfect sense to you, if there's no surprise, no amazement that God would save *you*, if you say, "*Of course I'm a Christian. I was raised Christian. I believe all the right things. I do all the things I'm supposed to do. The Christian life is not always easy, but I do it.*", if that's your attitude, if it's just plain obvious that *you* of all people would be a Christian – then you have yet to grasp the gospel.
    - Your religion is a religion where those who have the right parents, the right upbringing, the right beliefs and behavior are obviously saved. **Yours is a religion that the world would consider right side up.** "*Of course you're a Christian. You grew up in church. You talk like a Christian. You even look like one. Of course.*"
- ❖ **But whenever the world is confronted with the real gospel of grace, it gets confused.** Everything in the gospel looks upside down. Looking at Mary – this poor, peasant girl from no-good Nazareth (cf. Jn. 1:46) soon to be surrounded by scandal and shame – the world would take one look and say, "*She's cursed. Her life is ruined.*"

- But the Bible says, “*No, generations will call her blessed.*” The values of the world are inverted. God doesn’t look upon the regarded, the ones with the strong case for why *they* should be saved.
- ❖ Rather God’s eyes on the disregarded, the lowly, the ones who are simply amazed that God would look on them in their humble estate, the ones who say to themselves, “*Never in a million years would I be a Christian but for the grace of God.*”, the ones who are blown away that God would count them blameless and exalt them to his right hand.
  - That’s a Christian. Now if that’s not your attitude, then you’re not yet a Christian. You can’t sing this song *yet*.

### Those Who Have it All Together are Scattered

- ❖ But I want you to. I want this to be your song, and by the grace of God it can be. But let’s keep looking at this passage because you need to first count the cost. I don’t want you to say you didn’t know, that no one told you, that you weren’t prepared for how revolutionary Christianity is. The gospel turns everything on its head.
  - Let me show you the second inversion that Jesus brings. **2) Because of this baby, those who think they have it all together are scattered.** If you think you’re on top, you’ll be shocked to discover yourself on the bottom. Mary’s song is no sentimental Christmas carol. It’s not full of Christmas cheer.
    - Look with me starting in v51. “<sup>51</sup>*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; <sup>52</sup>he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.*”
- ❖ Mary sang in v49 that God is mighty and has done great things. But then she gives a warning in vv51-53 not to make the common mistake of thinking that because God is great he’s partial towards the great. **Don’t think because God is mighty he favors the mighty.**
  - Quite the contrary. It says he scatters those who are “*proud in the thoughts of their hearts*”. We’re talking about a pride that is deep-seated and central to a person’s character. *And what’s their pride rooted in?* Their might and their money.
    - They’re sitting on thrones with full purses and full stomachs. They have every human reason to consider themselves blessed. They have it all together. But behold, it turns out the gathered are the ones to be scattered.
- ❖ There’s a great illustration of this later on in Luke’s Gospel. At the end of chapter 16, Jesus tells this **parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus**. The Rich Man thought he had it all together. He had the money. He had the might. He had a full stomach. It says he “*feasted sumptuously every day*”. While Lazarus laid at the Rich Man’s gate begging for table scraps.
- ❖ You ask people in our culture to assess the situation. *Who do you think is blessed and who’s cursed?* The answer’s clear. No one aspires to be in Lazarus’ position. He’s begging for table scraps? He’s cursed. We want to be in the Rich Man’s blessed shoes.

- Of course we wouldn't be as cruel. We'd take Lazarus into our home, feed him, and clothe him. We'd hope to be a kind and generous Rich Man.
- ❖ But that still misses the point. That kind of thinking betrays an underlying belief that the Rich Man is still more blessed than Lazarus. That those with money and might are still in a better position than the poor and lowly – even if only so they can be a blessing to others.
  - **So long as your view of blessedness corresponds with one's social or economic status, then you're still thinking like this world.** For you, Mary's song probably still sounds a bit strange as if it's in a foreign language. It sounds upside down.
    - But that's what happens in the parable. The tables are turned. Everything gets flipped upside down. Lazarus is exalted up to Abraham's bosom and the Rich Man is cast down to be tormented in Hades (Lk. 16:22-23). **There's a great inversion – those who think they have it all together are scattered.**
- ❖ Listen, nowhere in the Bible is money or might, in itself, being condemned. As if it were sin to be rich or in a position of power or influence. **The Bible never says it's wrong to be rich. But it does say it's wrong to die rich.** It's wrong to end your life with a hoard of wealth, simply laying up treasure for yourself (cf. Lk. 12:13-21).
  - There is a danger that accompanies wealth and power. Scripture warns that the conveniences of the rich and the social standing of the powerful will be temptations to grow too independent of God and too insensitive towards the needs of fellow man.
    - Jesus taught that it's difficult for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Lk. 18:24-25). Not because wealth is evil in itself but because wealth breeds independence – a self-centered, self-reliant, godless independence that makes it difficult for anyone to enter the kingdom by faith (dependence) in Christ alone.
- ❖ This is what the rich need to beware. This is what *we* need to beware. Let's be honest, the vast majority of us in this congregation are rich and in positions of power, or we will be once we graduate with that professional degree.
  - Knowing this, we need to listen to this aspect of Mary's song. **God, in stark contrast to the world, is not partial to the rich, the powerful, or the proud.** This world is! That's what we're told to chase. But how many people have crashed and burned flying after pride, power, and wealth, flying upside down without even knowing?
- ❖ It's very likely Theophilus – the man this was originally written for – possessed all three. There's a good chance he had power, wealth, and a lot to be proud of. So this is not some sentimental Christmas song. It's a warning. Theophilus, consider this God of the gospel. He's not impressed by your money or your might. Yes, he's great but that doesn't mean he's partial to the great. In God's eyes, you're no better than the poor.
  - *Is that the God you want to worship? If you were looking for a God who gathers the proud and exalts the mighty and satisfies the rich, then you've got the wrong God.* You don't have the God of the gospel. You don't have Jesus.

## The Little are Lifted and Filled

- ❖ Jesus is so much better than that. Consider our final point, the third inversion. **3) Because of this baby, those who know they are little and have little are both lifted up and filled up.** Those who are gathered – who think they have it all together – are scattered while the scattered are gathered up and lifted high.
  - God has "*exalted those of humble estate*" (v52). "*He has filled the hungry with good things.*" (v53) What's Mary saying? She's saying the God of the gospel lifts up the poor. He tells those who have little and are little that their smallness doesn't matter.
    - But the world has a different message. The world is always telling the poor that they don't count. They don't have the education, the skills, the pedigree, the connections to really matter in this world.
  
- ❖ Religion is the same. Religion says the decent people, the educated, the hard-working and moral, those who aren't lazy or licentious – they get to God. They get to enter the kingdom.
  - But Christianity comes along and says salvation is an act of sheer grace. **The gospel says that the decent people, the moral people, the professional people are no better off than the poor.** Likewise, the poor person is no worse off than the upper class person or middle class person.
    - We're all sinners who fall short of God's glory. We're all sinners in our own respect. We're all in need of a Savior. And Jesus' blood is sufficient for all. Through his life, death, and resurrection he purchased a salvation that none of us could pay for. It can only be received freely by grace through faith.
  
- ❖ This is how the gospel of grace lifts up the poor and lowly. It doesn't try to turn poverty into a virtue. **The Bible doesn't say you're more godly if you're poor.** Yes, it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom but it's not like it's super easy for poor. Poverty has its own set of snares.
  - **Proverbs 30** says, "*Give me neither poverty nor riches . . . lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.*" (30:8-9) So being poor has its own temptations. Don't gloss over that.
    - **But the point is that the gospel has this power to dignify the poor.** It comes to those who are already humbled, who know they have nothing and are nothing, yet by faith in the gospel they're lifted to a seat of heavenly honor.
  
- ❖ There's another great illustration in Luke's Gospel of this kind of inversion. In chapter 21, Jesus is with his disciples in the temple court, and he looks up to see these rich men putting sizable gifts into the offering box. But then comes this poor widow who puts in all she has, two small copper coins, and Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "*Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them.*" (Lk. 21:3)
  - Now from the world's perspective, those are just pretty words. They sound nice but they're meaningless. There's no way her two coins are more than all that the rich men were dropping in. We don't see it. *But what if it's because we're looking at it upside down?* That's what Jesus is saying.

- ❖ **Jesus is saying *this poor widow is the one who's truly rich in my Father's kingdom.***  
Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom. Blessed are you who are hungry, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep, for you shall laugh (Lk. 6:20-21). The last will be first and the first will be last (Lk. 13:30). If it doesn't make sense it's because you're still upside down.
- ❖ C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Great Divorce*. It's a parable in which Lewis goes to heaven and a guide shows him around. There's this moment where he sees this parade of bright Spirits dancing and singing all in honor of one lady who shines brighter than the rest.
  - Lewis is blown away by her beauty. He turns to his guide and whispers, "*Is it? . . . is it?*" "*Not at all,*" he said. "*It's someone you'll never have heard of. Her name on Earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green.*"
    - "*But she seems to be . . . well, a person of particular importance?*" "*Aye. She is one of the great ones. Have you not heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things?*"
- ❖ It's because of Jesus! With his birth comes this great inversion. And again, it's not because he's introducing a foreign, alien reality to our world. **No, in all of history Jesus is the only one born of woman who saw reality as it truly is.** In a real sense that poor widow *was* rich.
  - What Jesus said was right side up, but to see it and to believe it, we need to be turned around. Like I said before, we need to be converted or inverted.
- ❖ Let's be honest again with who we are as a congregation. **We have to remember that not only does the gospel show the poor that they're no worse off, it also shows the middle and upper class that we're no better off.**
  - Now you can figure that out gently right now. If you're middle class, upper class, if you're a professional person, you can be converted to Christ and come to realize that you're not better than the poor – that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. You can believe the gospel and be drawn down to your knees in humble submission.
    - Or you can ignore this gospel and find out the hard way that you've been flying upside down this entire time.
- ❖ The Puritans had this saying: **The same sun melts the wax but hardens the clay.** The same gospel will lift some up but bring others crashing down.
  - Which is it for you? You need to decide. Now that you've heard Mary sing of this gospel, the question is: *How will you respond?* Is the gospel melting you? Humbling you? Is it stirring up faith and affection?
    - Or is it hardening you? Does it offend you? Does it sound foolish and totally upside down? Which is it?
- ❖ The fact that God would pass over the proud, the powerful, and the rich to show favor to a poor, lowly girl is a foretaste of this great inversion that has and is to come. It's going to happen. The only question is if you're going to be lifted up or knocked down.