

Transfer Your Treasure

Today is the second Sunday of Advent and this year, we are doing a “how-to” series called “How to Advent.” Now, the reason we’re doing this is because chances are, you’ve not been taught how to “Advent,” you’ve been taught how to “Christmas.”

Christmas has become domesticated and commercialize. And while there are a smattering of religious things added in, they’re usually drown out by Christmas shopping, busyness and exhaustion. Advent, on the other hand, is a time of reflection. It’s the time when we remember the first coming of Jesus, look forward to the second coming of Jesus and use the time to align ourselves with the values of God’s Kingdom. But too often, instead of aligning ourselves with God’s Kingdom, Christmas has become a time where we train ourselves in the values of the earthly Kingdom.

After last week’s message, I got a great email from a family in the church. The *husband* grew up in a typical American household. The *wife* grew up with parents from a different culture and religion, so Christmas wasn’t on their radar.

She said that every year they have to fight the forces of cultural Christmas. But it was interesting because she said it’s easier for her than for her husband because she didn’t grow up with all the baggage of our American Christmas celebrations. This about that, it’s easier for someone who didn’t grow up Christian to observe Advent than for

someone who grew up in a Christian home. There are things many of us need to unlearn. For most of us, it'll look something like this. [Backward Brain Bike clip]

Fascinating, isn't it? I had to cut down the episode, but one thing I didn't show you is that while it took him 8 months, it only took his 5-year-old son two weeks to learn to ride a backward bike. What that says is that this shift will be harder for adults than it will for kids because we've created some deep pathways in our Christmas celebrations. So, even if this seems strange and wrong, stick with it and eventually it'll click. And if you're a parent, the earlier you start with your kids, the quicker they'll be to get it.

Today, we're talking about another aspect of celebrating Advent and we'll do it by looking at Mary's response to the news that she would give birth to the savior of the world! It's from Luke 1:46-55. Mary's response is a song known as the "Magnificat."

Now, most historians say Mary, most likely was a girl around 14 or 15 years of age. She also grew up in a day where there wasn't much of a middle class as we know it. Generally, there was rich and there was poor. The rich were the government officials, royalty, some merchants, but pretty much everyone else lived at a subsistence level. That was life for the majority of the people—including Mary.

Now, Mary was also Jewish and her people, Israel, had been under the authority of the Romans. She didn't know if it would happen in her lifetime, but she expected that someday God would send a King—the Messiah—to free her people from the tyranny of the pagan Romans.

She was a nobody from a nation of nobodies. So, when the angel Gabriel showed up and said, **“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” (vs. 28)** You can understand how she could have been “greatly troubled” by his words. Me? “Highly favored? What are you talking about?”

But he comforted her and then said this. Verse 31, **“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”**

This is Messiah language: Son of the Most High, sitting on the throne of his father David, etc. is Messiah language. He didn’t have to explain it further, she knew she would be the mother of the Messiah. This would change Israel’s history and her future.

After a visit to her relative, Elizabeth, who was carrying John the Baptist and confirmed what the angel said, Mary reflected on what was happening. And it’s interesting to walk through her song and see her expectations. So, let’s do that...verse 46.

And Mary said: **“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.”** Today we get excited today when someone from humble beginnings finds fame or fortune. We love stories like this because it’s not unheard of for someone from a poor neighborhood to get out of poverty or even find fame and fortune.

But that wasn't the case in Mary's day. There were no "rags to riches" stories. The class you were born into is where you stayed your whole life. If you were insignificant at birth, you were insignificant at death. Mary realized things were different for her—not because of anything she did, but because God chose her.

She continues in verse 50, **"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm..."** She's remembering the old stories where God was always faithful to those who fear him. But she lived in a time when God seemed to have forgotten his people. Now it seems God is finally taking action. But what did he do in the past and what will he do in the future?

Second half of verse 51, **"...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."**

The Messiah will begin a great reversal. Today we consider humility is a virtue. But in Mary's day, humility was only appropriate for slaves, people who were poor, people in the lower classes. But for the rich and powerful and influential, humility was a character flaw. Obviously, they were great because you always get what you deserve. If you're rich, it's because you're something special and God has favored you. But if you were poor, God must not care much about you—so neither did society.

But Mary rejoiced because God doesn't operate that way. Rather than favor the proud, who think they're better than everyone else, he *scatters* them. She says that God

actively works against people who think they're "all that." He *brings down* rulers from their thrones. God is doing something new and judging the old way.

But God lifts up the humble and the poor—those who have no opportunity or value in society. Not necessarily by making them rich, but by lifting them up and providing for them. **"He has filled the hungry with good things." (vs. 53)** Mary rejoices because God sees her and people like her. He and notices them. That's salvation language.

We treat the coming of Jesus as this nice, sweet event because it's about a baby and what could be sweeter than a newborn baby? But the coming of the Messiah was more subversive than that. Sure, Jesus came in the form of a baby, but don't be fooled. He didn't come to melt people's resolve with cuteness. To some, he came as a judge.

Theologian Flemming Rutledge wrote this, *"the image of Jesus as the cosmic Judge who will ultimately come again to put an end to all sin and wickedness forever is not so frightening to the poor and oppressed of the earth as it is to those who have a lot to lose."*

This reversal is how Mary thinks of the coming of the Messiah and it excites her! But how often does this image come to mind when WE think of Christmas? I would guess that "good news to the poor" isn't what comes to mind when we think of Christmas. Our image tends to be more middle-class American.

Now, Jesus loves middle-class Americans, too. But around Christmas time, we seem to have more in common with the proud and rich than we do with the humble and poor. Sure, most of us will probably give a little something to charity—stick some cash in the

Salvation Army bucket and say Merry Christmas to the bell-ringer—because Christmas cheer. But how many of us think of the coming of Jesus specifically as good news to the poor? Maybe good news to our kids or good news to our closets, but for most people, the poor are an afterthought.

In fact, here are the stats. The average American adult will spend about \$885 on Christmas gifts this year.

- 33% expect to spend at least \$1000 on gifts.
- 22% expect to spend between \$500 and \$999.
- 29% expect gift spending to be between \$100 and \$499.
- 3% plan to spend less than \$100.

Overall, that's \$720 billion spent on Christmas gifts. Compare that to the \$410 billion dollars Americans gave to charity in *all* of 2017. And that number includes corporations, bequests and foundations. Now, religious people do give significantly more than non-religious people, but it's still only a fraction of what we spend on Christmas gifts. We'll talk more about giving next week, but today let's just focus on our spending.

So, let me ask you this question...Thinking about the two groups of people reflected in Mary's song, *Do our spending habits during Christmastime identify us more with the humble and poor or the rich and proud?* What does our Christmas celebration say about what we value? In what way does our Christmas giving curate our hearts?

Now, some of you might say, "Yeah, but we're not spending it on ourselves! We're giving it to our loved ones!" But that's a very individualistic way of looking at it. If you're

middle class, so are your kids and chances are so are your brothers and sisters and so on. Even when you give gifts to family members, you're keeping it in the family.

Our habit of giving big gifts during Christmas subtly convinces us we are self-sufficient and that we can find happiness in possessions. It guilts us into thinking our kids will love us more if we get them the latest gadget. We might look forward to being with Jesus when we die, but we don't really *need* him right now, thank you. Flemming Rutledge continues...

"If your loved one is in the habit of buying you expensive Christmas gifts, you might not be so crazy about the idea of Jesus coming back before Santa Claus gets here. But suppose you had been a Christian in prison in the Soviet Union. Or suppose you had been a black person in Apartheid-era South Africa directed to pack up your meager belongings and take them to a so-called homeland that wasn't your home and that wouldn't offer you dignified employment. Suppose you were elderly and handicapped in the South Bronx and had just been robbed and terrorized for the third time. In circumstances like those, you might say Maranatha (which means "come Lord Jesus") and really mean it."

Now, I understand how we started giving gifts on Christmas—God so loved the world that he gave... and of course, the wise men gave gifts to Jesus. So, I understand that, but it's been co-opted by opportunistic marketers so that it doesn't much resemble the original intent and in fact works against much of how Jesus taught us to live.

For instance, in Matthew 6, Jesus says this, **“¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

So, let me ask the question again, “What does your Christmas celebration say about where your treasure is?” More specifically, what does the way you spend your money say about where your treasure is? Of course, this is a question all the time, but we often treat the Christmas season as our opportunity cast off restraint.

When we use Christmas as our opportunity to accumulate, it curates our heart in a few ways. First, it curates it to *desire* material things. It teaches our children that the most important part of Christmas is getting what they want.

Second, it causes us to ignore the poor and focus on ourselves. Not everyone, but the majority of us have everything we need and most of what we want. We don’t need a special opportunity every year to accumulate more. It’s easy for us to forget that compared to 99% of the world, we live in Disneyworld. But why should Advent be one more time for us to insulate ourselves from how most of the world lives?

In seminary we had some friends who grew up on the mission field and they tell the story of the greatest gift they gave their dad for Christmas. They saved up for a long time to buy him a six-pack of Pepsi. And he was moved to tears by it. How many of us

would be moved to tears by that gift? It's all about our expectations and compared the most of the world, our expectations enormous.

Third, it curates our heart to believe we can't afford to give generously to the poor. For many, Christmas eats up the margin we have to be able to give throughout the year. Now, some might bring up the fact that even Scripture itself tells—even commands—people to have *extravagant* celebrations. So, there's a place for feasting and extravagance to celebrate the abundant grace of God. I completely agree.

That would be totally valid if most of us didn't live that way all year-round. We live in abundance throughout the year *then* we ramp it up for Christmas. So, if that's how you do it, consider using the weeks of Advent as a time of fasting leading up to Christmas Day, then feast. If you don't deny yourself most of the year, then let Advent re-orient you.

So, if we were to celebrate Advent, rather than Christmas, how would we spend differently?

First, we would make remembering the poor—like Mary, rather than accumulating for ourselves, a greater part (primary part?) of how we spend in this season. Now, there are good ways and bad ways to give and we'll talk more about those next week.

Second, we would set a limit on your gifts to your family and stick to it. In fact, keep the limit fairly low because it'll require you to be a bit creative.

Third, we would be mindful of how we're giving and what we're giving. What do I mean? Well, let your gifts express your desire for relationship. A few months ago, we

talked about the fact that when God gives us the gift of grace, he does it because he wants to establish a relationship with us. So, will the gift you give allow you to spend more time with them? Will it make them better as people? Will it draw them closer to Christ for further away? Keep these in mind as you give.

When you're more intentional about what you give, how you give, and who you give to, it can better reflect the spirit of Advent, it can help free us from our slavery to possessions, create financial margin to give more to ministry and people in need and teaches us to trust God for our security and identity.