

**Advent 2022 - The Songs of Christmas**  
**11/27/22**  
**Week 1**

**Intro series**

For those perhaps new to church - Advent is typically when the historic church all across the world takes four Sundays before Christmas to anticipate and remember how Jesus came into the world to save the world and how He is going to come back one day.

And during this season - Christian or not - we will encounter some semblance of the Christmas story. Whether it's alluded to in a song or a movie we watch, where it can get really easy to sort of "assume" we've heard it all before. And when that happens, we miss out on what makes Christmas great. So for this Advent series, we want to push back against what culture says about Christmas in two specific ways:

**1 - Our Advent initiatives**

This is something we've done quite during this time of year. We want to be intentional in our generosity because God has been so generous to us by sending His Son, Jesus into the world. So while the pull, especially during this time of year, is commercial and consumer-driven - "what can I buy?" - we're doing a handful of initiatives where we ask, "what can I [giv]?"

- Tithe if you're not already
- We're raising \$ for STC events
- Sign up for our Personal Finance Class

**2 - we're gonna study what the Bible has to say about Christmas**

Crazy, right? So to do that, we're going to look at the four poems or "songs" that make up Jesus' birth story in **Luke 1-2**. Today we're going to look at the first "song" in Luke: the song of Mary. So if you have a Bible turn with me to **Luke 1:46-55**.

**46** And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

**48** for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

**49** for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

**50** And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

**51** He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

**52** he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;

**53** he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

**54** He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

**55** as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

A summary of Mary before this: By the time we get to her story, Mary's a Jewish teenage girl

from a religious family who's engaged to a Jewish teenage boy from another family. And lo and behold, an angel shows up to her Mary one night, which - for the record - is not a normal thing.

Angels typically were associated with God's judgment. So Mary's already pretty bewildered. That's why a lot of times in the Bible, angels tend to open with "fear not," which is kinda the equivalent of "hey, hey it's cool. Everything's cool. Be cool." So the angel says, "Fear not, Mary, I have good news - you're pregnant. And in 9 months, you're gonna give birth to the Son of God." To which Mary quite naturally replies:

**34** "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Which - good question. If you thought people in the Bible were so ancient and unmodern that they were preconditioned to believe in anything, Mary's like, "Ok...I know how babies are made. I just took ninth-grade biology. So, what are you talking about?" Eventually, Mary, during this conversation with the angel, says,

**38** "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Mary likely knows the implications of what will happen from here on out. And she says basically, "Let it be so."

Shortly after this story, she goes to meet her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah - we'll get more into their story next week but notice what the text says:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Mary's angel visits her in Galilee, and right after she sprints down to visit her friend in the region of Judah, some 60-80 miles away. Now we don't know why she's in such a hurry, the text doesn't say, but I can imagine- given that we're told this directly after the angel speaks to her - that Mary is probably scared out of her mind. And it's here Elizabeth encourages her and is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins prophesying to Mary how incredible this is.

And shortly thereafter, we get to her song. She busts out like it's a musical number as she praises God that she gets to be the one who will be the mother to the Savior of the World. This song is commonly known as "The Magnificat," Latin for "magnifies." And this was the first Christmas banger, long before "All I Want for Christmas Is You."

Now I'll go ahead and admit I can tend to just glaze over these parts of the Bible. I'm not much of a poetry guy, I like the story. But what's interesting is that the biblical authors often use poetry and song to cover massive theological insights and cram it all into these short, punchy lines.

So when you read biblical poetry you've got to look for clues. You've got to reread a few times over to understand what's going on - which I think is a low-key move on the biblical writers to force us in a way not to gloss over the Bible but to dig into it and see what it says. So one clue when you read this - look at the repetition in vv.48 and 52 again:

**Luke 1:48**

for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

**Luke 1:52**

he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;

There's this repeated phrase in the poem "humble estate." That's one word in Greek, **ταπεινωση (ta-pay-no-sis)**. It basically means to be brought low, meekness. The way we've said it before, humility is the ability not to think less about yourself but to think about yourself less because your attention is fixed on something bigger than yourself. It's this self-forgetfulness where you're not thinking about yourself.

And what's wild is Mary is someone who is already, from a cultural perspective, in one of the lowest and humblest places imaginable:

1 - She's already living in a society where **Jews are this marginalized and oppressed minority** by the Roman political regime. The Jewish people have had no political power for some 500-plus years at this point. Rome is an oppressive empire, that rules over the Jewish people with brute military force. It's not like with us where, if you don't like how a politician rules, you can petition, protest, and vote them out. No, protesting or saying anything against the Empire is guaranteed to get you killed.

Not only that...

2 - She's a **teenage woman** in this society. Which for what it's worth, women in that world were not given any prominence or authority. Marriage was essentially their only way to ensure that, if you were a woman, you would be provided for. If you didn't marry or you were a widow without a grown son to provide for you, it would be extremely difficult to have your most basic needs met. So here's Mary, as a Jewish young woman, engaged but not married yet.

But on top of that...

3 - Her getting pregnant before marriage means **she will be ostracized by her everyone**. You see, everyone in her society also knew how biology works. People don't just magically get pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She's a virgin; she's celibate. She's not married. She's in a very religious community. And she knows full well because of her Jewish upbringing, learning from the Hebrew Bible in the temple, that the moment word gets out that she's pregnant, she will be viewed in her culture as an object of scandal and shame. She will likely be ostracized by her family and peers. People will talk behind her back. When her and Joseph get married, people will view it as a shotgun wedding of sorts. And that social shame will loom over her for the rest of her life.

And that's a big "if" Joseph decides to marry her. They're engaged and now Mary's saying she's pregnant? Joseph would have been totally in the right to break off the engagement because, in his mind and everyone else's, she's been unfaithful. And if that happens, then there goes Mary's source of security.

All this to say, this is not quite the cute and cuddly Christmas story you see on the Hallmark channel.

So Mary as a young pregnant Jewish woman is in one of the most vulnerable, marginalized, and lowly places imaginable. And yet - as **v.30** says she has - found favor with God.

- Literally, “found grace from God.” To be clear, this does not mean she was morally perfect or anything like that. This phrase is used in the OT to describe Noah too. This is more a disposition of the heart to trust God and His promises. A posture that says “I know who God is, and I know who I am in light of that, and so I’m going to respond accordingly. “

You see, growing up in this Jewish community, it was likely that she grew up going to the Jewish temple every week, she’s heard about this God of the Bible her whole life. She’s heard stories about this God is powerful enough to speak the world into existence and yet tender enough to come down and speak words of comfort to His people. She’s heard stories her whole life about this God who calls Himself a Father who is so mighty, He strikes down the Egyptians who enslaved His children and yet He is compassionate enough to forgive His people over and over again.

Mary has this biblically informed picture of her Father God and she’s drawn to Him.

And the beauty is, God sees her and her humility and says, “This is the type of person I’m looking for. This is the woman who I will raise up and bless so that through her - the world will know the full extent of my power and tenderness through my Son Jesus.” The whispers that Mary heard in the Scriptures of God taking on flesh, of God coming down and saving people from their sin, will finally become reality and she will witness it firsthand because of her posture of humility.

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And I think just right there - it says something pretty powerful and beautiful about who the God of the Bible is: that the way he chooses to reveal Himself is not through the culturally powerful. It's not through the wealthy, or the influential or the elite. God doesn't choose to reveal himself through the means of political might or celebrity platform...but Advent shows us He chooses a poor, unwed, Jewish girl in a relatively forgotten corner of the world.

This brings us to the first point I want to make this morning:

### **1 - Advent is for the lowly in spirit**

Just look at Mary, and how to the world's standards there's nothing particularly flashy or powerful about her position. And yet, God chooses her.

So for anyone here this morning who feels small, or unimportant, or overlooked, or marginalized, or abandoned, or who feels like their life doesn't matter, Advent tells us to think again. Advent says look to the story of Mary and see that God delights in and chooses the lowly to make His power known to the world. He delights in making Himself known through the weak and humble of heart.

In fact, all throughout the Scriptures, God says it is the lowly and the humble that he delights in:

#### **James 4:6**

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

#### **Matthew 5:3**

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

#### **Psalms 34:18**

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

The story of Advent says when you see your lowliness, that's the place where God meets you. In your humbled estate, that's where God finds you.

Which poses the question, how exactly does God meet us in our lowliness? Look back again at Mary's song; the clue is found in vv.54-55:

#### **Luke 1:54-55**

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Mary looks back on the Hebrew Scriptures and is comforted that when God says something is going to happen, it will happen. She points to the fact that God remembers His promises. The Bible is full of this:

- Some 2,000 years before the angel appeared to Mary, God promised Abraham that even though he was 80 years old, he would have a son. And God didn't forget or back out of His promises. God kept His Word.
- Or, some 1,400 years before the angel appeared to Mary, God promised Moses that His people would be led out of slavery. And God didn't shy away, and He didn't say, "On second thought, Egypt is way too powerful for me." No God showcased his power and might, and He God kept His Word.
- Or, some 400 years before the angel appeared to Mary, there was prophetic silence, where God didn't speak anything to his people for four centuries. Nothing. No word from God. To put that into perspective, 400 years ago for us was the year 1622. Imagine believing and hoping that God would act and show up - and the last time he showed up was in the year 1622. To the casual observer, it would seem like God forgot about His people.

And yet, Mary knows how God has worked in the past and is confident that God will see her through it all. That He will keep His Word. And her response we see in this passage is that she sings it out. God is finally breaking the silence and says He plans on staying true to His promises. And so Mary's response now is to simply worship him with this poem we see here. Now keep in mind, her choosing to worship doesn't mean her life isn't magically fixed. She will still have to bear the shame for the rest of her life, and yet, because she is in this lowly place, she clings to God's promises and chooses to worship.

Notice then - her fear does not take away her ability to worship. In fact, not only does it not prevent her from worshipping, it is a prompt for it. Her fear becomes a prompt for faith.

This brings me to the second point this morning of what Advent teaches us:

## **2 - Advent is for those who cling to God's promises**

That's why Mary is able to worship God in her lowly estate. It's not her circumstances, or her feelings in the moment, it's that she chooses to trust God at His Word that she's able to meet Him.

Mary has this posture that says, "God, I don't know exactly how my life is going to turn out, but I'm trusting you on this one, and I'm going to worship." You've kept your word then, and I trust you are going to keep your word now. "God, I know my family might disown me. My fiancée might leave me. My town will look down on me. But Lord, I know who you are and I know you're gonna keep your word, so I'm going to worship you because you're my only hope."

You see, when fear and suffering and anxiety are at bay, wanting to invade our lives, Mary shows us this wonderful example of how to fight back the darkness and cling to hope - by worshipping our way through it. Because worship may not change our circumstances, but it changes us.

I think about how - in some of the hardest parts of my life - when things didn't turn out the way I wanted them to, being by myself in the car with worship music on repeat. And then eventually getting to a place to sing, despite how I'm feeling. And then, eventually, those words begin to

sink in more, and my singing became a shout and I'm just ugly crying in the car. I'm sure if someone drove past they'd probably think something was wrong with me. But I tell you, in those moments, they've been some of the moments I've felt closest to God.

Or at other times, maybe it wasn't singing, maybe it was calling up a friend in LifeGroup just to tell them what's going on. Or opening up the Bible and reading some truth about God's character even though in that moment, my heart wasn't particularly there.

But I'll be honest with you, 9 times out of 10 that is not my go-to response. When life gets hard, and the unexpected phone call comes through, or when the doctor tells you the news you don't want to hear - my initial response tends to be to bottle up. To self protect. To distract myself with something else that's within my control.

So turning it on us for a second, what tends to be your natural response when you get feelings/news that brings worry? What do you do when you are brought low?

- Do you tend to bottle it up, stuff it down, or brush it off?
- Do you tend to distract yourself, busy yourself, or numb yourself?
- Do you blame yourself, blame others, or blame God?
- Or do you let your feelings get control of you?

Something Allen has said on stage before, our emotions are like a kid in the car. You can't let them drive the car, but you also can't ignore them and put them in the trunk. You've got to acknowledge them and put them in their place. Which sounds great, but how do we actually do that? How do we put our feelings into their proper place?

Here Mary shows us. She trusts in the promises of God when the news hits. And she's moved to worship. This thing that's happening in her life right now could cause a lot of fear and anxiety and worry and uncertainty, but in some of first words she's able to say in **v.47**, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

And so for us, 2000 years removed from this story - Advent is a reminder for us that in our lowliness when we fight to trust in the promises of God - it's there that He meets us.

- So when you see your sin and your failure...when we see our lowliness and think "well this is just who I am", may we be reminded that God is greater forgiver than you are a sinner, and where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more, and may you draw near to God and cling to those promises, because He delights in being with the lowly and its there where He meets you
- When life has not turned out the way you wanted it to turn out...when we see our lowliness and think, "God why did you let this happen?"...to take comfort in the reality that God cries with you, he's endured every pain and hardship to be with you in those seemingly cold and joyless moments. And may you draw near to God because He makes His power and presence known through our weakness
- If you find yourself in a season where God feels distant. Perhaps depression has crept in and it seems like the darkness just won't lift...when you see your lowliness and think, "God where are you right now?" - may you take rest that God has promised He will never

leave you or forsake you and He is with you even in the darkness, because He came to this world through the lowly so that He could meet you in your lowliness

And I can't think of a better place to process through that than right here with the people of God. In part, that's what "church" is. It's not for the people who are put together, rather it's for the lowly, for the folks fighting to believe, and who are determined to worship their way through.

That's what we see in the passage. If you look back at the text, Mary had to go process this all with her cousin Elizabeth before she was able to truly cling to God and worship. It's this sense that we, as the people of God, are fighting together through this - through the pain, through the doubt, through the heartache - persevering to cling to God's promises.

- This is why we sing and hear God's Word spoken over us especially when we don't feel like it
- This is why we take communion even when our hearts feel disconnected from the Lord
- This is why we meet in homes together
- This is why we plead with you to open up your Bibles each day because worship is a fight. And it is thought the fight that God means to change us from the inside out.

And it is in that fight, in our lowliness, that God meets us

### **Conclusion**

This is what Advent invites us into, remembering the promises of God, meditating on and worshipping the God who sees us and delights in us no matter where life takes us.

My guess is, this is a big reasons why - even Christian or non-Christian - people love this time of year. It's why people rewatch Christmas movies and why studios keep making and remaking them - it's because in all of those movies it always "works out in the end."

- Kevin McCallister's family comes home.
- The Grinch's heart grows three sizes. John McClane thwarts the plans of
- Hans Gruber at Nakatomi Plaza.

And I would argue the reason why we gravitate towards these story with happy endings is because we are made in the image of God and deep down, we long for our lives to be like that. For everything to work out in the end. And the beauty of Advent is that, because of God coming down to save humanity, one day it will. God will keep His Word.

### **Julian of Norwich**

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

### **Keller (quoting Tolkien)**

Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost.



Advent shows us that God is making all things new. He is redeeming everything that is broken in the world. And He does that, first by entering into the world through lowly means:

- God who created the world simply by speaking it into existence will be born into the world in a cold, dark and lowly manger and His name will be Jesus
- Jesus, the one who reigns and rules supreme, will say of Himself that is “lowly of heart and gentle in spirit” - He will identify himself with the lowly to be with us
- Jesus who is filled with all holiness and power, will walk throughout his life among sinful lowly people like us to show grace and mercy
- Jesus who is the fountain of life, will endure the shame and ridicule of death on a Cross all the while trusting the promises of His Father so that He can bring us to Himself

Jesus will endure the lowliness of the Cross because He knows three days later He will be exalted. The Savior who was born will defeat death. And for those who trust Him, Advent is a reminder that God intends to keep His promises to us.

One day shame will be gone for good. One day death will be done away with forever. One day sin will be no more. One day His Kingdom will fully come down - on earth as it is in Heaven. And we will, like Mary, burst into song.

But until then we follow the pattern of our King Jesus

- who took on lowliness and sacrifice, and we serve and sacrifice for others so that we can be raised up with King Jesus too
- Who gave His life away, so we too give our lives away, so that we can experience more of His presence in our lives

But until then we wait and we sing because Advent is for people like us.