



Giftng Christmas Presence: Worship Fully

Luke 1:26-56

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December 3, 2017

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” sings Andy Williams. “With kids jingle belling, and everyone telling you “be of good cheer.”

You know what I find odd about this song? It’s little more than an attempt at the American Christmas culture ‘Christmas-splaining’ how you should feel this season. Am I wrong? “Everyone telling you, ‘be of good cheer.’” The song basically says this season should be the happiest of them all because of the parties you’ll host, the marshmallows you’ll roast, and your caroling out in the snow. As if you aren’t doing it right if you aren’t hosting parties, roasting marshmallows, or if you hate going out in the snow. I don’t know about you, but my Georgia blood does not much care to be out in the snow, caroling or not!

The song isn’t done yet ... It should be your best season of the year because you’ll be getting kisses under the mistletoe, your heart will be happy as loved ones draw near, and you’ll reflect on the beauty of past Christmases.

This song, along with many of its counterparts in the Christmas hits list, assumes two things of Christmas: first, it assumes that you have healthy relationships with friends and family and that you want to be with friends and family to celebrate Christmas; and second, it assumes that Christmases of the past have provided a pleasant and memorable experience for you.

I consider myself fortunate to have family and friends I want to join with at Christmas, but not every Christmas experience I’ve had has been positively memorable. For example, I remember as a teenager that on Christmas day, I received a gift from my mother, and complained it wasn’t the gift I wanted. So, bless my mother, on Christmas day, she went online and begrudgingly bought me the other item. I’m not sure I ever fully repented of this, but not a Christmas comes that I don’t think about how much heartache I gave my mom on Christmas day that year.

A year earlier, our family dog of over 10 years, a beautiful golden retriever named Beau, died the morning after Christmas as we left on a 6-hour drive to Florida to visit family. Not a Christmas comes and goes that I don’t think about the heartache of losing that dog, who was with me throughout my childhood.

In December 2009, Jen and I had just gotten engaged when I received news that my Uncle Bill had died. At the time, my family was drawing names for Christmas gifts and that year, Uncle Bill had drawn Jen and me. Unbeknownst to us, prior to his passing, he had already purchased a gift for us for Christmas. So, come Christmas time, we joined with the extended family around the tree the family property in Tallahassee, and we received the gift that Bill had bought for Jen and

me – it was a gift card to Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse. Not a Christmas goes by that I don’t think about Uncle Bill and that gift card with joy *and* sadness.

With such a litany of experiences around the Christmas season that elicit sadness, it should come as no surprise that much of our world chooses to turn its focus on the temporary happiness that can be found in the garland, the trees, the lights, the Christmas cookies, and the gifts.

This past week, in chapel with the Preschoolers, our Director Jasmine and I posed the question to the kids, “What are we celebrating this time of the year?” Not unexpectedly, the responses came back about how this season is all about the toys and the gifts. When pushed further, asking them, “Why do we get gifts and toys at Christmas,” one little girl responded, “Because Santa doesn’t need all those toys.” ... I’m glad to know we’ve become Santa’s Goodwill store, where we receive the things he doesn’t have need for anymore!

Perhaps the response of the children isn’t to be unexpected, but it does make me wonder, would our response as adults be much different? We may not celebrate the gifts and toys as much as our children, but in recent years it’s become evident to me we have people who worship Christmas for many of these temporary aspects. For example, who doesn’t love visiting the houses that have millions of lights that dance and flicker to the sounds of Christmas songs on the radio? There are full TV shows dedicated to the phenomenon: The Great Christmas Light Fight has aired for the past four years, comparing the biggest and best personal lighting displays around the country.

I’ve been in some homes at Christmas that look like a Christmas shop themselves, where every square inch of shelf, wall, and floor space is covered with Christmas decorations. Other families I know don’t have as high a quantity of Christmas decorations, but their quality is on point. I had one friend growing up whose family had a rule that every present under the tree had to have a bow. I remember the father used to always get in trouble because he’d use the prefab bows that just stick on, and his daughter used to fuss at him for breaking the family tradition of tying bows on the packages.

Believe me when I say, I am just as materialistic as anyone else – especially when it comes to Christmas. I have certain expectations and traditions that, Lord help you, you better not screw up. In my reflection on Christmas and our preparation thereof, I don’t wish for a second that we would get rid of the bows, the garland, the lights, the gifts, or the trees (regardless if they’re so old they can’t stand up straight anymore).

But I would be remiss if I didn’t hear Luke’s story of Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary, and Mary’s response, and hear a call by God to give pause in my preparation as the season of Advent begins. The story invites us to give pause in preparation for Christmas and ask of ourselves, for what are we preparing? In this season of Advent, are we preparing ourselves to celebrate the birth of Christ, or are we simply masking the heartache of life with the splendor and gaudiness of seasonal familiarities?

The story tells us that about 2000 years ago, a young teenage girl named Mary was visited by an angel of God, named Gabriel, in a small town near Galilee called Nazareth. She was engaged, but not yet married, to Joseph, who was of the lineage of King David. The angel said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Seeing her to be caught of guard (I mean, she was a young teenage girl who found herself isolated and face to face with a man she did not know. Even today, we would encourage our sons and daughters to be fearful of such an encounter), Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid, for you are favored by God. You will conceive and bear a son, and his name will be Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign forever; his kingdom will know no end."

Mary was still perplexed. "How can this be," she asked, "for I am a virgin." And the angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of God will overshadow you; your child will be holy; he will be called the Son of God."

Then, the angel says, "Your relative, Elizabeth, in her old age, has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month." Mary responds, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according that what you have said."

As we read on, we have to keep in mind the context of the time and the situation. Mary – who is a young teenage girl, who is still living with her parents, and who is engaged to Joseph to be married – leaves and travels to a town in the hill country to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth. The angel didn't tell her to go see Elizabeth; the angel simply used Elizabeth as an example to show how God is possible of all things, for Elizabeth was old and barren, and yet she had conceived a son. Why did Mary go, and did her parents and fiancé not question where she had gone? Luke tells us that Mary was with Elizabeth for 3 months; she left just before John was born. 3 MONTHS. Again, did her parents and fiancé not care that she disappeared for 3 months? The text doesn't tell us.

I wonder if she left so quickly because, as a poor unwed young woman, she could have been killed for conceiving a child prior to marriage. Did she fear the repercussions of her family or Joseph? She seemed to have accepted the message of the angel that she would have this child, but perhaps she wasn't convinced the family would be so agreeable?

When she arrives at Elizabeth's house, we're told that the child Elizabeth is carrying jumped in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Hearing this detail is important, for it tells us that the actions that will follow are actions that are God-driven. Just as the Spirit filled the disciples and flooded them into the streets at Pentecost when they received the Spirit, here the Spirit will be the one who moves Elizabeth to speak and act. Elizabeth cries out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" The baby kicks, the Spirit takes over, and Elizabeth calls Mary the 'mother of my Lord.'

When we hear Elizabeth say, “Mother of my Lord,” we assume she’s talking about Jesus – who will be the Savior and Messiah. But at this point, Mary’s carrying an embryo that is not even discernable to be a son. We know Elizabeth to be saying “Lord” in reference to Jesus only because we have read the full story. But what did Elizabeth mean in that first-century context? In their Jewish tongue, “the Lord” was a reference to God. So, either Elizabeth was calling Mary the “mother of God,” or, perhaps because of the Spirit who had filled her, she was able to speak of the Lord in a way that she did yet even not fully understand herself. The latter seems to be the case given her welcome to Mary.

“Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. *Because* she is filled, she is able to recognize the work of God in what by traditional human standards would merit only criticism and judgment (that is, Mary’s unwed early pregnancy).”ⁱ Mary left home to be with Elizabeth, where she was welcomed with the grace of God’s spirit. In response, she breaks out in song and worships.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,” she begins, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She goes on, “The mercy of God is for those who fear him from generation to generation. The Lord has shown strength with his arm, scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He’s filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

Mary’s worship – her song – is known as the Magnificat “because she magnifies God, pointing to him as she worships and confesses his great love *for* and future salvation and deliverance *of* the oppressed.”ⁱⁱ “The lyric of abundance that Mary sings ... is not just pious, religious sentiment. It is a message encompassing politics, ethics, social structures, and economics.”ⁱⁱⁱ The message she proclaims is the message Jesus would live with his life. Her song of praise will become the model for how she raises Jesus, and will become the message that defines his life, teaching, and ministry.

Filled with this conviction of who her son would be, Mary’s song professes that amidst the false dichotomy of despair and optimism, there is another way: the way of hope. “Hope, you see, implies circumstances that are dark or difficult enough to require us to look beyond ourselves for rescue and relief so that we might hear again and anew God’s promise to hold onto us through all that might come and bring us victorious to the other side.”^{iv} Mary had quickly made her way to Elizabeth at the news of her pregnancy, seemingly without any conversation with family or fiancé. But after three months, when she was just beginning to show, when she could no longer hide the pregnancy, she returned to the very place she was most vulnerable to cultural repercussions. Yet, she was no longer fearful of what might become of her, but instead, she was filled with the hope of the promise of the Lord who grew inside of her.

It is that hope – the hope that stands against stories of injustice, the hope that stands against racism, the hope that stands against economic warfare, the hope that stands against religious othering, the hope that stands against poverty, the hope that stands against death – it is **that** hope that Mary proclaims in worship as she is welcomed by Elizabeth, and as they are each

filled with the Spirit. The season of Advent presents us this opportunity to intentionally worship this hope: the hope that lies in the miracle of the incarnation.

One last story: David Lose, a Lutheran pastor in Minneapolis writes on his blog, “My former colleague Garcia Grindal, one of the church’s most prolific contemporary hymn writers, started one of her Advent hymns with a line that [sings]: ‘We light the Advent candles *against* the winter lights.’ ... Not *because of*, or *during*, but *against*, reminding us that the light of Advent, like the light of Christ, is a veritable protest to and resistance of the darkness that gathers all around us.”^v

In this season, we may want to question if we have put too much attention toward the temporary and seasonal gifts, bows, trees, parties, and lights. But perhaps getting rid of them is not the most faithful way. Perhaps, in a world where darkness seems lurking with each ping of the news cycle, we would do better to allow the goodness of the symbols to stand out and speak up for the good news of God in the gift of Jesus Christ. Perhaps, with Mary as our model, we should encourage poets to pen odes, musicians to compose songs, and prophets to stand and call us to see what God sees: that the birth of his Son signifies the beginning of the end of injustice. And filled with the hope of such reconciliation of God’s humanity, we too will find cause to worship more fully. For when we receive God’s promise of Christ, justice and mercy will not be seen as side-thoughts or add-ons to our celebration, but justice and mercy will be seen as intrinsic to God, and therefore intrinsic to our lives in worshipping God.

And in the world today, faithful people, true disciples of the Risen Lord, are needed to sound the horn of justice that is promised in the incarnation. The church is needed to proclaim the hope of which Mary sings. So may we light the trees, may we set the candles ablaze, and may we boldly proclaim in song and worship as Mary did, for there is good news in the coming of Christ the King. For the glory of the Lord, may we worship more fully this season, rejoicing and giving praise as we sing, share, and remember the gift of God in the manifestation of the divine in Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Justo Gonzalez. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Luke*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, & Greg Holder. *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jane Anne Ferguson. *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

^{iv} David Lose. davidlose.com. Retrieved November 29, 2017.

^v Lose.