

Matthew 5:5-8

December 24, 2017, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-55

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Sermon Title: The Most Heart Touching Gift

I'd like to start by inviting you to think back to Christmas, after Christmas. As you are scrolling through your memory, I invite you to key in on the one Christmas gift that you received that has touched your heart the most.

*... give everyone a few seconds to think and identify the one gift that has touched their hearts the most....*

Now that you have that gift in mind, I invite you to take a moment to tell the person sitting next to you what that gift was or is.

*... give everyone a few seconds to talk with their neighbor...*

With that special gift in mind, I'd like to turn to our scripture passages for today and talk about them for a moment.

The passage from Luke begins with Mary visiting Elizabeth. The Scriptures say that the baby in Elizabeth's womb reacted to the visit by jumping for joy. At the same time, Elizabeth was feeling deeply blessed to have believed what the angel Gabriel had said to Zechariah, her husband, several months earlier. So we can conclude that Mary's visit was not only a very heart touching and thrilling gift to Elizabeth, but that it was also quite the gift to Elizabeth's unborn son. Notice: you can't buy that kind of a gift in a store.

At the same time, Mary was given a gift that deeply touched her. She had the gift of God's favor.. She had the gift of being chosen by God to partner with God in an endeavor that would change the world forever – that endeavor was to bear God's Son. She had the honor of the responsibility of carrying and giving birth to Jesus. Imagine – what a gift! Notice: you can't buy that gift in a store either.

What amazes me most is Mary's response to this gift, this honor and this responsibility. She honors God in return by trusting God and God's promises. She honors God in return with a beautiful recitation of what God has done and continues to do. God gives mercy and blessing to those who revere him. God brings justice by elevating those of low decree, enriching the poor, and humbling the privileged and the rich. God's power prevails, generation to generation. God continually provides what is required by those who are deprived and in need. In short her response is not self-centered at all. Her response to these gifts is totally God-centered.

Her response could have been totally different. Put yourself in Mary's shoes for a minute. She's been told she will bear a child and she isn't even married yet. Because she is engaged to be married to Joseph, in Biblical times being pregnant

wouldn't have been shameful as long as the dad was your betrothed. The problem was that Joseph her betrothed is not the father of the child.

There's also the problem of pregnancy itself. Childbirth under any circumstances is no walk in the park. That's why they call it labor. Even beyond the pain is the fact that without modern medicine, many women did not survive childbirth. So between the fact that Joseph was not the father and the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, Mary could have responded to her situation not with faith, but with fear. She could have responded not with joy but with shame, not with grace, dignity and grit but with anger, resentment and a very sour attitude. Instead she focused on the new life, as well as the life-giving, love lavishing power of God at work even in and among her and her family and friends. As I said she was totally God-centered in her response.

There are a lot of problems in our world today that demand our attention. There are a lot of things that could cause us to be afraid and to have a pretty sour attitude. Recently millennials were surveyed as to what they saw as the world's most pressing problems. ([www.businessleader.com](http://www.businessleader.com) - August 29, 2017)

- #10: Lack of economic opportunity and employment
- #9: Safety, security and well-being
- #8: Lack of education
- #7: Food and water security
- #6: Government accountability and transparency. On the flip side: corruption
- #5 Religious conflicts; moral decline
- #4: Poverty
- #3 Inequality – discrimination
- #2: Large scale conflict – war
- #1: Climate change.

Think in your mind: how much of that list do you agree with? My guess is that there's a lot of it that you'd agree with. In addition, there may be some really big problems in your family. Don't you see that in many respects it was no different for Elizabeth and Mary. Think of the number of problems that the millennials identified that were true 2000 years ago: it's no secret that back then the Roman government was seen as an occupying enemy and the local government was corrupt. There were religious conflicts; there was poverty, inequality, etc. etc. And in addition Mary had the problem of being pregnant before marriage by God, not by Joseph.

The point is: in the face of so many problems, it's easy to look for an easy way out... Easy to be afraid of the future, because the trajectory of some situations and problems seems to be leading to a dim and troublesome outcome. It's easy to get sucked into the hyped up materialism that is in our faces at every turn and to believe that buying something will solve our problems.

But remember that gift that touched your heart – rather than focusing on the problems for a minute, in your mind, look into the eyes of the person who gave you that gift and as you do, look behind their eyes to see something of the lavishness of

God's love planted there. Look to see something of the mercy, grace and goodness of God there. Be like Mary, and be God-centered for a moment? How much more powerful and important, then is that mercy, grace, goodness and power of God in our world today?

One more thing: There's quite a pattern of social reversals going on here in this passage. Mary will be honored, not shamed for bearing this child. Elizabeth opens her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbors would expect her to reject. She sees God's love and power at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes. In choosing Mary, God is choosing not the politically and religiously powerful, but a woman of no means and no status. God chooses an ordinary woman through whom to do extraordinary things. In choosing the setting of the hills of Judea as the setting, God is not choosing the cities of power and prestige – Rome, Jerusalem – as the setting for the beginning of this chapter in salvation history. And then there's Mary's song of praise itself: Mary's song of praise reminds us, that again and again, God lifts the humble nobodies and humbles the proud, rich and selfish. God helps the poor over the rich. God is merciful not to those who bargain with him or seek to buy his favor, but is merciful to those who simply fear and revere him and seek to follow his ways of justice, kindness, goodness, mercy and love.

If you are looking for God at work and for a source of hope this Christmas season, please take a clue from this passage – that God keeps showing up where we might least expect: with a betrothed woman of no status and means, at a manger, on the cross, and among the vulnerable - that God shows up among those and uses those whom society would overlook, disregard and dismiss – and when God shows up and uses them, what happens is more powerful and more problem solving than anything that the rich and powerful can do. That's the gift. It's a gift given for you and for me and for the whole world.

Don't let this Christmas go by without really letting the gift of Jesus touch your heart too. The way that God gave when Jesus was born was giving something of himself to us for all of eternity. Figuratively speaking, look into the eyes of God, to see the power of his love lavishly showered on you and the world – a love that is full of surprises, a love that makes even the impossible not only possible, but actually happen. Be like Mary – not self-centered, but God-centered.