

# All I Want for Christmas Is...

Advent 2020

Message #4 – “All I Want for Christmas Is...A Mistletoe” (Love)

Luke 1:39-55

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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As we prepare for God's Word today, would you join me in prayer?

*Heavenly Father, open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. In Jesus's name. Amen.*

The Christmas Story in the Gospel of Luke has a way of bringing the birth of Jesus into perspective. If you can imagine what was going on in the hearts and minds of those people in the first Christmas story, it really brings depth to what God was doing back then... and what He's doing today... even this year, 2020... even in this season of the pandemic. If we look, we can see the heart of a God who is redeeming all things... we can see that God has a plan and He's carrying out that plan with purpose and intentionality.

Take Mary, for example. Think about her for a minute. She's a teenage girl who discovers that she's pregnant—even though she has never been intimate with a man. Her family, her community, her fiancé, Joseph... they all find out that she's pregnant... and they begin to jump to the logical conclusions: “She must have cheated on Joseph,” “She must have violated the Jewish Law”... and “Does this mean that she will be put to death?...”

And then Mary tells them that this baby is *God's* doing... that an angel came to her and told her that she was to bear *God's* Child – the Messiah... that *God* chose her to be His special servant in carrying this baby to full term.

The angel told her she would be a *God-bearer*.

Can you imagine what they all thought? Can you imagine how the people in her synagogue gossiped? Can you imagine how people looked at her as she – fully pregnant – walked through the marketplace?...

And yet, we see Mary's confidence, her unwavering assurance that God was indeed doing this. After all, she saw what she saw. It was an angel.

And then she hears the news that her much older relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant—somehow miraculously. So, Mary goes to visit her – perhaps to the momentary relief of her parents (who are still trying to determine whether or not to believe their daughter).

Now, we don't know a lot about Mary from the Bible. But we do know *some* things. For example, we know that when the angel came to her to share with her what God had in mind, she humbly said, “yes.” ... **“Let it be to me according to your word.”** That's what she said.

But, in her encounter with Elizabeth, we learn a bit more about Mary. Let's look at that exchange starting in Luke 1:39...

*<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child [that's John] leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "**Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.** <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that **the mother of my Lord** comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And **blessed is she who believed** that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:39-45)*

**"Blessed."** That's the word that's used several times here. Elizabeth *feels* the supernatural nature of not only her own pregnancy, but also of Mary's. In fact, Elizabeth's baby – John – feels it too. He "leaps" inside of his mother's womb. So, in their own way, Elizabeth and her unborn son both acknowledge Mary -- and her unborn Son -- as being holy, as being special.

Yet, Mary doesn't take the blessing as entitlement. In verse 46 we read...

*<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,  
"My soul magnifies the Lord, (Luke 1:46)*

"My soul **magnifies** the Lord." The word used in Greek is the word "megalyno" which literally means "to enlarge or to amplify." Look at this, what Mary is saying is that this whole deal with being pregnant with God's Son... it's not about her. It's about God. It's about what God is doing. It's about a Baby that would be born to change the world, to change all of history. Her life is not about entitlement, not even about *her* being blessed. Her life, her pregnancy... it's all meant to magnify, to amplify the Lord and His greater plan and purpose. Mary surrenders her rights, her life to the plan and purpose of God.

Would we do that?

The passage continues...

*<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,  
"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and **my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked **with favor** on the **lowliness of his servant.**  
(Luke 1:46-48)*

Do you hear the deferral? Elizabeth begins to praise Mary -- and Mary instead defers the glory to God. You see, Mary knows herself. She makes no assumptions about her worthiness for such a task. She knows that she's "lowly." In fact, she knows how blessed she is---even in her poverty, even in her humility, even in her meekness... she knows.

And God knows. God found in her exactly the kind of person He wanted to raise His Son within the stark limitations of humanity. The apostle Paul tries to get this same point across when he writes about Jesus in Philippians 2. He says...

*[Jesus], being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
7 rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
8 And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!  
9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. **(Philippians 2:6-11)***

Who does God want raising His Son to grow up to give up His life out of love for those who show very little sign of deserving such love?? – He wants someone who, within humility, knows who she is and who God is – and doesn't confuse the two.

Mary certainly knows who she is. And in her humility, she agrees to serve God in this special way. Elizabeth's words trigger Mary's excitement and awe in the moment, and she is overwhelmed by the goodness of God.

— Have you ever been “caught up” in a moment when you were overwhelmed by how much God loves you?

Overcome by God's great love for her, she starts speaking prophetically. This is what she says...

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
50 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 powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” **(Luke 1:49-55)***

So, Mary says, “My soul magnifies ... My spirit rejoices... He has done great things for me” — then the rest of the song is about **what God did / what God does / what God will do, not about her directly.**

Look at the remaining verbs in this passage –

- <sup>51</sup> He has **shown strength** ...  
he has **scattered** the proud ...  
<sup>52</sup> He has **brought down** the powerful ...  
and **lifted up** the lowly...  
<sup>53</sup> he has **filled** the hungry ...  
and **sent** the rich **away** empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has **helped** his servant Israel,  
in **remembrance** of his mercy, **(Luke 1:51-54)**

It's all about God – what God has done and will do through His act of coming down, by becoming human... by being with us.

And all of it reflects the heart of God's love for the world, for us. All of it.

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* ~ That's what the adult Jesus would say to the Pharisee Nicodemus in **John 3:16** (NIV).

You see... The Christmas story reflects God's love for us. And so does Mary's submission to God's plan.

This journey of faith and life is not about us. When you say "yes" to God, when you surrender to the redemptive love of the Cross of Christ, you actually give up your rights to define your own destiny, to define your own life.... you surrender control over the things that you think are important. In fact, in putting our whole trust and faith in Jesus, we actually discover that control is an illusion—it's not real. We also give up power—over others, over our circumstances...

...and when we do so, that's when God fills us with Himself – with His life, with His power, with His Spirit... and we become God-bearers – just like Mary.

You know, this time of year we tend to see mistletoe showing up. Mistletoe has been associated with Christmas—and with kissing or expressions of romantic love when you stand under it. The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe became popular in England in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and then flourished ever since.

In fact, I remember a time about 32 years ago when I was single and I lived in the church's parsonage. It was Christmas time and I was throwing a special Christmas party for the youth of the church at the parsonage. Kristine volunteered to come help me decorate and prepare all of the food for the event. As a joke, I purchased a small mistletoe ornament and asked her to hold the ladder as I placed it on one of the ceiling beams in the center of the living room. Certainly, my agenda was to get a reaction from the students as they realized what it was... but, truth be told, in my mind, I had hoped that Kristine might allow me to take advantage of the moment with a kiss. It was mistletoe after all.

She didn't. ☺ We weren't dating quite yet at the time... but I was hoping.

Interestingly though, mistletoe is actually a parasitic plant. It attaches itself to a tree or bush and then extracts water and nutrients from its host plant. As a result, the host plant can suffer from mistletoe's toxic, life-sucking effects.

Now doesn't that describe *way too many* relationships?!

In spite of its actual toxic nature, mistletoe reminds me that sometimes we go searching for love, searching for somebody to love us or someone for us to love... and we settle for the kind of love that takes, rather than gives.

But love is not really love unless it is given away—freely, unconditionally.

About a year and a half after my mistletoe incident, I married the woman who did not kiss me that Christmas. For our wedding, as my gift to her, I wrote Kristine a song. The chorus of that song reflected on the apostle Paul's definition of love in First Corinthians 13. One of the phrases goes like this: "*Love is ever shown when it seeks not its own; but gives itself all away.*"

Mary's song, often called the "Magnificat," is her way of honoring the God who was honoring her. And in it, she invites us to remember God's love toward us, toward all of humanity... a love meant for "*all on whom His favor rests*" -- as the angels would tell the shepherds at the time of Jesus's birth.

What Mary teaches us is that **our lives are meant to magnify God's love for the world**. Our lives are meant to draw attention to what *God* has done, what God is doing and what God will be doing—not so much about what *we're* doing. Our lives in Jesus Christ are to show that we are blessed **to be a blessing to others**.

God's love. It's both personal and relational. It's both individual and corporate. And it's both singular and multiplying.

- **personal and relational** – If you were the only person who lived in a broken relationship with God because of sin, Jesus would still have given His life for you. But you're not the only person... we're all in need of His gracious act of unmerited love.
- **individual and corporate** – why? Because nothing short of the salvation of the entire world is God's ultimate desire.
- **singular and multiplying** -- it's meant for us personally, but it's best when it's shared with others. In fact, when we share God's love, it multiplies exponentially.

The Bible passage finishes in verse 56. It says...

*<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with [Elizabeth] about three months and then returned to her home. (Luke 1:56)*

Mary returns to her hometown, much more pregnant than when she had left... yet much more equipped to face what was yet to come...

- a long trip to Bethlehem
- no room available for her (either because Bethlehem was crowded, or no one in Joseph's family wanted to take them in because they know she was pregnant before they got married)
- giving birth in an animal's cave
- fleeing the evil, murderous attempts of King Herod
- raising a child who was different than the other kids
- watching crowds respond to Jesus's teaching
- watching crowds reject Him
- watching her Son being beaten mercilessly
- watching her Son being crucified
- holding her dead Son at the Cross in the same arms that cradled Him in a manger

It was a lot for God to ask of her. But she said, "*yes... my soul magnifies, amplifies the Lord.*"

She knew who she was, and she surrendered it all to the Lord's larger purposes.

**Our lives are meant to magnify God's love for the world.**

How is your life going to magnify the Lord this Christmas?

Let me pray for us...