

Coming to the Manger to Find Love

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-56

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We all believe that it is more blessed to give than to receive, right? Now it has been scientifically proven: it's good to be good. CNN is doing a holiday series called "Giving in Focus: The 12 Days of Goodness," in which they are highlighting a variety of people who are doing good. For example, there's the retired nurse in Atlanta who volunteers as a Baby Buddy at a neonatal intensive care unit. Her job is to hold preemies lovingly. Tough job, huh? Here's why it's important. The medical staff is so busy that they rarely have time to just hold the babies lovingly. They give shots. They take temperatures. They keep records and do all the other things that are so important in an intensive care unit. Preemies, some of whom are there for months, also need a loving touch and tender words and kind faces. They need a Baby Buddy, so volunteers step in and give.

A man named Stephen Post, a professor and medical doctor, has been studying this issue of giving and its affect upon the giver. He has found, not surprising to me, that generosity of spirit produces healthier and happier people. In a study at Harvard, a group of students was shown a movie about Mother Theresa. Another group was not. The students who watched the movie actually had a strengthened immune system—just from watching a movie about a remarkable woman of service. They did MRIs on the ones who watched the movie and discovered that certain parts of the brain lit up when they thought of giving and caring and serving. Dr. Post is doing a study now of people going through Alcoholics Anonymous. He's found so far that those who volunteer to help other alcoholics have a success rate that is nearly double those who don't volunteer to help someone.

It is more blessed to give than to receive, isn't it? Over the next few days many of us will be making a mad dash to find the perfect gift for someone we love. No ordinary gift will do. No toaster ovens. No neckties. It has to be the perfect gift. Because it's for someone we truly love. We'll take pleasure in selecting the gift. We'll enjoy watching them open it. We may not realize it but our immune system will be strengthened. Chemicals

will be firing in our brains. That's the way we're made by our Creator, who has given the Perfect Gift to those whom he loves.

Mary and her cousin Elizabeth were the first to celebrate God's Perfect Gift. The song of Mary in Luke 1 is called the Magnificat, which is the first word in the Latin translation. I heard about a children's sermon once where the children were asked the name of Mary's song. One child eagerly raised his hand and blurted out, "She sang the Magna Carta!" No, not the Magna Carta. It was the Magnificat, and it appears to be a spontaneous explosion of joy from Mary, sheer delight, that she had been chosen to give birth to God's Perfect Gift. It was such good news for Mary that she overlooked the grave risks. She was likely only fourteen or fifteen years old, the age most young women in their culture had their first baby. Many died in childbirth, and many babies never saw adolescence. It was a time that celebrated old age because old age was so rare. They knew little about diseases and effective treatments. Life in the time of Mary was hard and threatening. They were people who had a mouth full of sorrow and arms full of struggle. The news of a birth was good news, but they also knew that it came with a risk.

Luke notes that Elizabeth was already pregnant with John, who would be called John the Baptist, when Mary came to visit. According to Luke, when Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, Elizabeth's baby leaped within her. Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit and shouted to Mary these words so familiar to our Catholic friends, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Elizabeth knew. And Mary knew. It had been told through the ages. One was coming from Bethlehem of Ephrathah. He would be newborn and at the same time "from ancient days." He would lead God's people and they would live securely. He would be "the one of peace." He was God's Perfect Gift, and Mary was the handmaid of the Lord, the one chosen to give his birth. O, how blessed she was! And here is how Mary responded,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness
Of his servant.*

Now that's a pretty staid, formal translation of the Magnificat. I want you to hear the same passage from *The Message*. This translation takes some liberties, but I do like it. Here's why:

*And Mary said,
I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me,
and look what happened—
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!*

I've always found it interesting that the Bible speaks so little about happiness. Have you ever noticed that? Some translations take some liberties and translate the word "blessed" as "happy." A number of years ago, Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame translated the beatitudes of Jesus using the word "happy" instead of the word "blessed." "Happy are the poor in spirit.... Happy are those who mourn...." He called them the be-happy attitudes. While it sounds cute and probably sold well, I'm not the only one who believed that it was a poor translation. Blessedness and happy are not the same.

It seems to me that our culture prefers to be happy. Our U.S. Constitution protects our right to "pursue happiness." We tend to lavish upon ourselves things that make us happy. It is no accident that one of the icons of our culture, at least for children, McDonalds, offers our children a "Happy Meal." And you've probably noticed about how long it makes them happy. That's the nature of happiness. It is completely dependent upon pleasurable circumstances.

The text does not call Mary happy. It calls her blessed. "Blessed are you among women," Mary. Years later Jesus would use that word again. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he said. Not happy, blessed. "Blessed are those who mourn...." "Blessed are the meek...." "Blessed are those who are persecuted...." Not happy. Blessedness runs much deeper and does not depend upon a happy meal or pleasurable circumstances. Even given the risks, Elizabeth and Mary knew. She was blessed because she would give birth to God's Perfect Gift.

Have you seen blessedness lately? I have. Through the years, I've seen blessedness in many of you, who have faced your struggles with

courage and hope. I saw it at Crestwood Hospital this week, when I visited with the family of Jim Segraves. If you are newer here, you may not know that Jim is a longtime member of Weatherly. Many of you remember Jim's robust laughter and sense of humor. Jim hasn't had much to laugh about in the years following his stroke, though he has continued to smile. The last months have been especially difficult. He went back into this hospital on Wednesday, and the hospital placed him under "comfort care," their language to describe care that sees one comfortably to the end of life. I saw blessedness in Jim's face. I saw blessedness on the face of his wife of fifty-nine years. They weren't happy. No, they weren't happy; they were blessed, a blessedness that runs deeply and rests upon God's Perfect Gift.

I saw blessedness across the lunch table Friday as I talked with a dear friend about his funeral arrangements. I hope to put my notes in a file and leave them there for a long time. If that's not the case, he wants everything taken care of to relieve his wife and family of that responsibility. With calm born of a life well lived, he reflected upon his life, the things that were important to him, his wish to have a simple end to his life. Was it a happy time? No. It was a blessed time, a blessedness that runs deeply and rests upon God's Perfect Gift.

That's what I wish for each of you this year. Not so much a happy Christmas as a blessed Christmas. The Perfect Gift has been given. It is a gift, when our mouths are full of sorrow and arms full of struggle, that gives meaning and purpose to our living. O, how blessed we are! And so we come to the manger to find love.

Closing Prayer

Welcoming God, open our eyes to your Perfect Gift that greets us this day and every day. Amen.