



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 1:26-56  
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## The True Spirit of Christmas

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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In the Peanuts comic strip Lucy was saying that Christmas is a time for kindness and a time to forgive one another. Charlie Brown says, "Why do that just at Christmas? Why can't we have the Christmas spirit the rest of the year?" Lucy looks at Charlie and says, "What are you, some kind of religious fanatic?"

Last week we began our study of Luke's gospel. We saw that Luke is the gospel writer who focuses the most on preparation. He shows us how the way was prepared for the arrival of God's Son and how we ourselves must be prepared. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias in the temple and promised that his wife would bear a child who would prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Zacharias had a hard time believing that because he and his wife were well beyond the years of having children. He asked for a sign and the angel gave him more than he bargained for--he was unable to speak until the promised was fulfilled.

At this point in Luke's gospel, Zacharias exits the stage. He'll be back, but now we have scene change. Luke leads us from the great and holy temple in Jerusalem to an obscure village in a remote region not known for its piety. He leads us away from this well-known priest towards an unknown peasant; from an old man to a young woman. He leads us from Zacharias to Mary. More than anyone else in the Christmas story Mary demonstrates to us what the true spirit of Christmas really is. The true spirit of Christmas is not the spirit of family bonding, or the spirit of giving, or even the spirit of rejoicing. All of those things are well and good, but Mary teaches us that the true spirit of Christmas is a spirit of humility.

### I. The spirit of humility is seen in submission to the Lord's plan.

Mary's story is told starting in v. 26.

**"Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering**

**what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God.' And Mary said, 'Behold, the bond slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her" (Luke 1:26-38).**

There are some striking similarities between what happens to Zacharias and Mary. Both of them are visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are made what seemed like an impossible promise of a child. One of them would be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. The other would be conceived by the Spirit. Both are given a sign.

But the similarities end there. Mary is a young teenager from a podunk town called Nazareth in the region of Galilee. She was "betrothed" to a young carpenter named Joseph. That means more than engagement does today. It was a binding contract; any breach of it was considered adultery. To get out of it you had to initiate divorce proceedings. Betrothed couples had many of the responsibilities of marriage without the privileges.

We don't know what Mary was doing. Perhaps she was in the midst of her morning chores, daydreaming about her future with Joseph. What kind of husband would he be? How would they decorate the house? When would their first child come along? And then the unthinkable happened. The angel Gabriel comes front

and center. If that weren't strange enough, he makes an even stranger greeting. He calls her "favored one" and says, "the Lord is with you." She's baffled! Gabriel senses her confusion and explains more: she would conceive and give birth to a child, the long awaited Messiah. Like every Jewish kid, she had grown up hearing all about the coming Son of David. It might have even crossed her mind that Joseph was from the line of David. "But me, the mother of the Messiah?" And then it hit her, "Wait a minute, that's not how my mother told me it worked. How can I have a child? I've never been with a man?" It wasn't an expression of doubt, as with Zacharias, but of confusion.

And then came the shocker: "Who did he say the father would be? Something about the Holy Spirit making me pregnant." Imagine the swirl of emotions. On the one hand, she was stunned by the honor. On the other hand, she dreaded how this could play out. Jewish law said that a man or woman who committed adultery was to be stoned. Thank God the Romans didn't allow that any longer, she must have thought. And how would Joseph react? Could he possibly believe her story? "Hey Gabriel, could you pay him a visit too?" Otherwise, she would certainly lose him. She would be disgraced. All her dreams were dying.

A part of Mary would want to fall down in grateful praise; another part would want to protest at such an unfair intrusion into her life. But somehow in that battlefield of her own heart, she chose to surrender: "Behold the bond slave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." In simple faith, Mary said "yes" to God.

Do you see it? That's the spirit of Christmas – humility. Mary says yes to God's intrusion because she saw herself as a bond slave of the Lord. Humility is one of those Christian buzz words we love to talk about but when it comes right down to it everything within us protests against it. Humility expresses itself in surrender. A bond slave is one who has basically given up his right to call the shots. He realizes he doesn't own himself. He's not autonomous. He belongs to someone else. Think of how different your life would be if you saw yourself as a bond slave of the Lord. What would you stop worrying about? What would you stop wrestling with God over? What would you stop doing to secure your own place? Maybe you've been mistreated by someone – a friend, a coworker, a family member. You've been cheated and you're angry about it. You're not getting a fair shake. What do you do? How do you handle that? Do you try to secure your own position, demand your own rights? Humility means you start with surrendering your rights and plans and desires and questions to the

Lord: "Behold the bond slave of the Lord..."

Corrie Ten Boon tells the story of when she was speaking in a church and recognized a man in a gray overcoat. He was a guard in the concentration camp she and her sister were in during WW II. Memories of the concentration camp came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past the man. Now this former guard was in front of her with his hand thrust out: "A fine message, fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" It was the first time since her release that she had been face to face with one of her captors. She froze. "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he said. "I was a guard there. But since that time, I've become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I'd like to hear it from your lips as well." Again the hand came out – "will you forgive me?" She stood there – and couldn't do it. Her sister had died in that place. Hours seemed to pass as the man stood there with his hand held out, and Corrie wrestled with the most difficult thing she ever had to do. She knew she didn't really have a choice. Jesus commanded it. So she prayed, "Jesus, help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so mechanically she thrust her hand into his. As she did, she says a current started in her shoulder, raced down her arm, and sprang into their joined hands. And then a healing warmth seemed to flood her whole being, bringing tears to her eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment they grasped each other's hands, the former guard and former prisoner.

Corrie made the same choice Mary did. Those are hard choices to make, but could it be that as with Mary our greatest gifts come disguised as intrusions demanding our surrender? Philip Yancey writes, "Every work of God comes with two edges – great joy and great pain." I'm not suggesting we won't wrestle over this. There will be a battle within. Self never gives up easy, and right when you think you've got it where you want it, it rises up somewhere else. Jesus called us to take up our cross daily. It's the daily part that's so hard. Every day we have to make that choice. But as with Mary there is blessing on the other side of surrender.

## **II. The spirit of humility is expressed in knowing and accepting your place in God's plan.**

This brings us to the second scene. The angel said that she would be given a sign – her cousin Elizabeth was also experiencing a miracle; she was pregnant in her old age. Mary might have thought, "Perhaps she'll understand." So she packs her bags and heads south for the hill country of Judea where Zacharias and Elizabeth lived. It would have been about a four day trek to Elizabeth's house. She

had plenty of time to think about how she would present this to her older cousin. She may have even had a little speech prepared. But she didn't need it. Look what happens when she arrives.

**“Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord’”** (Luke 1:39-45).

I think this was one of those moments where you feel a massive load come off your back. This was confirmation for Mary: “No, I’m not crazy. Yes, I did hear the angel right. God is in control.” Mary didn’t even have to say a word. Before she could speak, Elizabeth broke out in a Holy Spirit inspired blessing on Mary and her child. It’s in this blessing that we see another example of the spirit of Christmas. Elizabeth’s humility is seen in the fact that she recognizes Mary as the most blessed among women. She’s humbled by the fact that Mary would come visit her; she doesn’t feel deserving. Unlike her own husband, she says Mary believed that the Lord would deliver on his word. Not only that, she recognizes that the child in Mary’s womb is greater than the child in her own womb. She calls Mary “the mother of my Lord.” She admits that when she saw her the prenatal John did a joyful somersault within her. John is pointing to Jesus even from the womb. Years later John would confess, “He must increase; I must decrease.”

Most scholars believe that in the back of Luke’s mind is another story out of the OT. Remember the story of the twins, Jacob and Esau, when they were still in their mother’s womb? They struggled for preeminence, even in the womb. When their mother prayed about it, the Lord said “the older will serve the younger.” That’s not the way it was supposed to work. In that culture, the younger was supposed to serve the older. Now, years later, we have the same message: the older (John) is going to serve the younger (Jesus). The difference is that no one is struggling. Both Elizabeth and John are filled with joy.

You see, humility is expressed by knowing and accepting your place in God’s plan. You have a place. We all have a place, but your place is different than someone else’s place. When we finally get that and stop comparing

ourselves with others and doing what WE’RE called to do, the result is just what we see here – joy. You can’t have joy if you’re always chafing under the fact that God’s plan for you doesn’t seem as important as God’s plan for someone else.

In the 1998-99 NBA basketball season, David Robinson, frequent all-star and veteran center for the San Antonio Spurs, learned to share the limelight with the new dominant player of the league: his teammate Tim Duncan. San Antonio won the NBA play-offs in 1999 and Duncan was the star. In *Sports Illustrated*, Robinson reflected on what this was like for him.

“I can’t overstate how important my faith has been to me as an athlete and as a person. It’s helped me deal with so many things, including matters of ego and pride. For instance, I can’t deny that it felt weird to see Tim standing on the podium with the Finals MVP trophy. I was thinking, *Man, never have I come to the end of a tournament and not been the one holding up that trophy.* It was hard.

“But I thought about the Bible story of David and Goliath. David helped King Saul win a battle, but the king wasn’t happy because he had killed thousands of men while David had killed tens of thousands. So King Saul couldn’t enjoy the victory because he was thinking about David’s getting more credit than he was.

“I’m blessed that God has given me the ability to just enjoy the victory. So Tim killed the tens of thousands. That’s great. I’m for him.”

That’s the spirit of Christmas – knowing you’re accepting your role in God’s plan. Thomas Merton once said, “Give me humility, in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride, which is the heaviest of burdens.”

### **III. The spirit of humility is seen in grateful worship for God’s salvation.**

Now as you might imagine, all of this was pretty overwhelming for Mary. So much so that she breaks out in song. I don’t mean that literally. I don’t think this is like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music* just all of a sudden starting to sing in the middle of the movie. But Mary’s words do have a poetic style to them. One of the interesting things about this song is that it has at least 15 quotations from the OT. Mary knew her Bible. The spirit of the song is one of praise and thanksgiving. If I were to name this song I would call it “The Great Reversal.” Its theme is God’s great reversal of fortune for the poor in spirit. It has two parts to it. The first part focuses on what God did for her. She says in

**“And Mary said: ‘My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bond slave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name.’”**

See the reversal? God had regard for her “humble state.” She was a nobody from a nowhere town. But now, she says, God has acted in such a way that future generations would call her blessed. She sees the same principle at work in others.

**“AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble. HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed. He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever”** (Luke 1: 50-55).

Once again, do you see the reversal? Now it's at work in others. The proud are brought down but the hungry are filled and the humble are exalted. Some have taken this as a political manifesto of liberation for the poor and oppressed of the earth. It was never meant to be that. The liberation she describes is not political or economic, but spiritual. Mary will be called “blessed” not because she'll get a new Mercedes, but because her Son would save her and others from sin. The liberation is not for the poor, period, but for the poor who fear God, trust God, and look to God for salvation. But the reality is that that's easier for the poor and oppressed to do than the rich and powerful. The rich and powerful tend towards pride and independence; they're more likely to say who needs God, which is why they'll be brought down.

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of humility. Like Mary, each one of us is born into a humble state. Spiritually we're bent towards sin, separated from God. But God sent his Son so that our fortune might be reversed. It's been said, “The Son of God became a man in order that the men might become

the sons of God.” There is a reversal in that. The Bible has a word for it: salvation. That's the theme of these opening chapters of Luke. The angel told Mary, “you shall name him Jesus.” That name means salvation. Mary sings of “God, my Savior.” What was Mary being saved from? Her sin, of course. Later, Zacharias will praise God for raising up a “horn of salvation” for us. And it's as we begin to claim that salvation that joy and gratitude will come into our lives. But salvation only comes to the poor in spirit. It only comes to the humble of heart.

The Masai tribe in West Africa have an unusual way of saying thank you. They bow, put their foreheads on the ground, and say, “My head is in the dirt.” Why do they do that? Because at its core thanksgiving is an act of humility. Humility isn't all “Woe is me.” It begins with “Woe is me” and ends with “Look what God has done for me.” Every one of us have a choice: will we humble ourselves before God and live gratefully, or will we continue to lick our wounds and wallow in self pity? The Christmas season can really bring that question to the fore, can't it? It's a hard time for many people. But no matter how hard it is, the message of Mary's song is that God has done something to reverse your situation – he has sent his Son to be your Savior – to reverse your fortune. And if you let it, that will bring you real joy.

## CONCLUSION

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of humility. It's a humility that is expressed in being willing to say, “I'm a bond slave. Be it done to me according to your word.” It's a humility that's expressed also in being willing to accept your place in God's plan. It's a humility that's expressed in grateful worship for a salvation you did not merit.

A well-known Christian writer and speaker was asked if it was difficult for her to remain humble. She replied, “When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road and singing praises, do you think for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him? If I can be a donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in his glory, I give him all the praise and all the honor.”

That's the spirit of Christmas – the spirit of humility.