

**PERSPECTIVES:
FROM THE BOTTOM RUNG
LUKE 1:39-55
DECEMBER 9, 2012**

In October we were all watching the presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

It was fascinating to hear different people's take on them.

It almost made me wonder if we were all watching the same debates.

The difference was one of perspective.

People came into those debates rooting for different candidates,

watching for different things,

hearing the debates completely differently,

and so thinking and feeling very differently about them.

And now we're all thanking God the election is over.

Differing perspectives can make all the difference.

This month we're looking at the birth of Jesus from different perspectives.

I think hearing different perspectives

might give us a richer appreciation for all that his birth means.

Last week we enjoyed the children's program, Star of Wonder.

It was the story of Christmas told from the perspective of the stars watching over the events of Christmas.

It was a view from high above.

Today we're taking a view from far below, from the bottom rungs of society.

We're going to consider the birth of Jesus from the perspective of

the poor, the hungry, the unemployed and underemployed.

Our perspective today will be launched by a song sung by a young pregnant woman you've heard of.

Her name was Mary.

She went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant.

Imagine what her feelings must have been.

She'd been visited by an angel and now was pregnant with her first child... before getting married.

Anticipation, fear, trepidation, anxiety over pregnancy and birthing,

sheer excitement over a baby,

wondering what other people would think of her,

and wonder at what God was doing in her and through her.

LUKE 1:39-55

Moms, when you were pregnant, did you sing that kind of song?

Or was it more like morning sickness, gotta buy prego clothes,

stocking up the nursery, how will we pay these bills,

and am I really up to this?

Mary's song been set to music by numerous composers,

including Vivaldi, Rachmaninoff, John Rutter, and most famously Johann Sebastian Bach,

and is called the *Magnificat*.

It's called the *Magnificat* because it opens with the words,

"My soul *magnifies* the Lord," or "glorifies the Lord."

After Mary greets Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the future John the Baptist,

the unborn child moves within Elizabeth's womb.

Both the baby and Elizabeth are made aware,

by the Holy Spirit,

that Mary is pregnant and will give birth to a child who is something very special.

Elizabeth praises Mary for her faith,

And Mary sings the *Magnificat* in response.

The words are closely connected to the Song of Hannah, found in the Old Testament. (1Sam.2:1-10)

Each one's pregnancy was a miracle gift from God.

Hannah gave birth to God's prophet Samuel,
who would speak God's word to Israel.

Mary, of course, will give birth to God's Son Jesus,
who IS God's word made flesh, coming to Israel.

(Jn.1:14)

In her song, Mary identifies herself with the lowly,

"God has been mindful of the *humble state* of his servant."

She's no one special, not from a priestly family,
not an aristocrat, not powerful or wealthy.

She's a common girl, pregnant under suspicious circumstances.

But she has been blessed by God.

And then she sings of the wonderful things God does and will do for his people.

"His mercy extends to those who fear him.

He has performed mighty deeds,
scattering the proud,
bringing down rulers,
lifting up the humble,
filling the hungry with good things,
sending the rich away empty.
and helping Israel."

Her song speaks of confidence that God cares about the lowly, the poor and the weak.

The world pays attention to the rich and powerful.

We constantly see and hear from Hollywood stars and powerful politicians.

People read magazines and online articles about celebrities, movers and shakers.

But in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, Mary says,

God cares about ordinary people, hungry people, poor people.

He will even come to dwell in their midst.

Mary knew the care of God from her own personal experience.

Mary's confidence in God's redemptive work is centered on the child she carries in her womb.

At the beginning of her song Mary addresses God as Savior.

That title means she has the recognition of her need for help from beyond herself.

She needs a savior.

We all do.

The truth is, rich and powerful people are not as likely to recognize their need.

And even us middle class folks may not get it.

We've got resources.

We've got connections.

We've got know-how.

We've got influence.

They may feel self-sufficient, self-made.

Do we sometimes feel that way?

Do I feel like I'm making my own way in life?

Do I recognize each day as a gift from God,
or do I just assume it's there for me?

When things go well, when you land the job,
get the promotion, receive the raise,
do you thank God for that gift?

Or do you think he really had nothing to do with it?
 Do we really consider that we do not deserve forgiveness and salvation?
 That heaven and the kingdom of God is not payment due us,
 but really God's doing and a pure gift to us?

It could be that we don't feel self-sufficient and secure,
 but we'd really like to.

After all, that's sort of the cultural ideal to aspire to.

Theologian Francis Schaeffer wrote that

Americans are driven by "affluence and personal peace."

Having those is where we so often have a feeling of control.

If we set our hearts on affluence and personal peace as our goal in life,
 we'll become vulnerable to the accompanying temptations,
 temptations that can lead to dark places.

The pursuit of cash and comfort can eclipse our commitment to Christ.

Judas Iscariot may have been driven partially by greed.

In John 12, we're told Judas regularly stole from the treasury.

Thirty pieces of silver would be a nice addition to that.

Part of his motivation may have been the pursuit of comfort.

Jesus had just told the disciples their futures wouldn't be easy,
 when Judas went to the authorities to betray him.

Only you can answer for your life.

I hope you will consider the question?

On what or whom do I rely?

Do I want the security of cash and comfort, or do I want God?

What is the true pursuit of my life?

In the *Magnificat*, Mary recognizes her own need of God above all else.

With the coming of Jesus, the role of God as savior is made tangible, in flesh and blood.

And we are told: Do not look anywhere but God for your help!

The Bible says don't look to witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and astrology.

Don't depend on your religiosity, your spirituality,

your abilities or education,

your political affiliations, or your good looks.

Depend only on Jesus.

In the birth and life of Jesus we see God coming to be close to those who are at the bottom of society.

Jesus was born to parents who were politically powerless,

shuffled from one town to another by the government's demand for a census.

He was born in a stable and given a feed trough for his first crib.

(Lk.2:1-7)

His parents were poor enough,

when they brought 8-day old Jesus to the temple to consecrate him to the Lord,

they could only afford to bring the sacrifice prescribed for the poor.

Not a lamb, but a dove or pigeon.

(Lk.2:24; Le.12:8)

Jesus' first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth was based on a reading from Isaiah,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."

(Lk.4:18; Is.61:1)

That trajectory continues throughout his ministry.

In one version of the Beatitudes he says,

"Blessed are you who are poor.

Blessed are you who hunger now.

Woe to you who are rich.

Woe to you who are well fed."

(Lk.6:20-21, 24-25)

Jesus addressed the issue of worry and anxiety over having enough,
 worry over whether you'll have food to eat or clothes to wear.
 And he says, "Don't worry. Don't be anxious.
 Worrying doesn't fix anything.
 But your Father in heaven knows what you need.
 Seek first his kingdom,
 and all those other things will be given to you." (Lk.12:22-31)

And right there may be the key to the whole rich-poor thing.
 Seeking after God rather than seeking after material things.
 I heard a pastor speak about how he realized
 his own perspective had changed as he become more successful and prosperous.
 When he was a young newlywed, he and his wife set out to plant a church.
 They didn't have a lot,
 but they gave up all but life's essentials
 to help pay for the fledgling congregation.
 They just scraped by for a few years,
 and gradually got their personal finances in much better shape.
 The church grew and then flourished,
 and they needed to move to a more expansive location
 and build a much bigger facility
 in order to keep reaching new people for Christ.
 And he confessed,
 "As we called on the congregation to give sacrificially
 so we could move and build,
 we realized we could easily write a check for
 much more than when we started.
 But we knew even more than that was needed.
 It wasn't so hard to put it all on the line
 when we had very little.
 It was much harder this time to get ourselves to do
 something truly sacrificial.
 There was so much more of *our stuff* at stake."

I heard his story, his confession,
 and I thought of what Jesus said,
 "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
 than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Lk.18:18-25)

Isn't it true?

There's a temptation in having financial and material comfort.
 The more we have, the more we cling to it.
 The more we have, the more we try to protect it.
 The more we have, the more we depend on it.
 And the less we may depend on God.

That's why I often talk about financial giving,
 not just as a way to fund the church's ministries,
 but as a spiritual discipline that teaches us to depend on God.
 As long as we're hanging on tight to all our money and our stuff,
 we might never truly trust God,
 and we may never experience his sufficiency.
 Sometimes the lesson is learned the hard way, when we have no other recourse.

The story goes that one night a house caught fire,
 and a young boy whose bedroom was upstairs
 was forced to climb out on the roof.
 His father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms,
 calling to his son,
 "Jump! I'll catch you."
 He knew the boy had to jump to save his life.
 All the boy could see, however, was flame, smoke, and blackness.
 The idea of jumping out blindly into the darkness terrified him.
 His father kept yelling:
 "Jump! I will catch you."
 But the boy protested,
 "Daddy, I can't see you."
 The father replied,
 "But I can see you and that's all that matters."

Really, truly trusting God may seem like leaping blindly out into the darkness.
 There's such a strong temptation to stay on the roof,
 where things seem to be solid.
 But it's only a matter of time before we find out that's just temporary,
 that beneath that seemingly solid roof are consuming flames.
 For those of us who have plenty,
 loosening our grip on our money and our stuff
 is where we can learn
 just how good and trustworthy our heavenly Father really is.
 Loosening our grip on whatever we're depending on to make life good
 is where we can learn
 God is more secure than that rooftop.
 We can depend on him.
 Or, we can learn it when those things are ripped out of our hands.
 Personally, I'd rather learn it by choosing to let go.
 Those who have very little to call their own might be in a better place to learn that truth.
 Not because they're more spiritually virtuous,
 but because they don't have the options available to us.
 Mary had that perspective,
 from the bottom rung of the ladder,
 even while she was just barely pregnant with Jesus.
 So she sang the *Magnificat*.
 A full recognition of her own dependence on God,
 the realization that wealth does not mean you've got God's favor but,
 in fact, it might even be an obstacle in your relationship with him.
 Her song is unbridled praise of God who is the one and only source of true wealth,
 the one and only source of abundant life.
 Can we sing along with Mary?
 Will we?

Scriptures cited: 1Sam.2:1-10; Jn.1:14; Lk.2:1-7; 2:24; Le.12:8; Lk.4:18; Is.61:1; Lk.6:20-21, 24-25; 12:22-31;
 18:18-25