

**Sermon Series: Expectations**  
**Things Will Change by David Hockett**  
**Luke 1:39-56**

**Boone UMC**  
**December 6, 2015**



You know, we say to one another during this time of year “Merry Christmas!” implying that there must be something about this season that brings happiness, merriment, and joy. All around there are signs of our attempts to make this season merry. We adorn our houses with lights and bows, we wrap presents in colorful paper, Christmas music fills the airwaves and shopping malls, people seem to be a bit nicer to one another, and there is something about all of this seasonal happiness that is fun and enjoyable. I like Christmas, I love the music, the lights, I am not Scrooge who believes it’s all a bunch of humbug. But, too often, I am afraid that what is implied in the greeting “Merry Christmas,” and what lies behind the lights, and decorations, and music is not at all related to the truth and mystery of this holy season, but instead is an attempt to manufacture happiness, to market it, maybe to dull our senses a bit to the reality that even though Jesus is the Light of the world there still seems to be a fair amount of darkness.

Perhaps we who gather in this place at least have some sense that underneath all the sparkle and festivity we should expect something more from Christmas if this season is to be truly merry, and if our Christmas joy is to be deeper, and last longer than a few weeks. I hinted at it last week but the truth is we have so sentimentalized and watered down the radical, earth-changing, revolutionary good news of the change that Jesus brought at Christmas, that even we the people who bear the name of the one who was born in Bethlehem’s manger sometimes are guilty of reducing the real joy of Christmas to little more than a kind of superficial happiness that we can be had by doing little more than taking a few decorations out of a box or purchasing just the right gift. I saw a commercial just the other day. I don’t really remember what they were advertising but the basic message was that if you want the people you love to have a merry Christmas then you better make sure this little box is under the tree because this particular gift will presumably change your life. The commercial was so over the top that it basically implied that if there was

anything other than a gift from their store under the tree the season would be a total loss and no happiness would be found on Christmas morning.

Why is it that we who have so much, we who are the wealthiest people on the planet, are so unhappy, spend more than any other nation on medications and other treatments for depression? Now there is a proper place for that, for the treatment of mental illness, but why is it that so many of us are so dissatisfied? Why is it in the nation that is founded on the premise that we should be free to pursue happiness - that happiness and contentment seem to be so illusive? What do you expect from Christmas? What kind of change do we need it to bring in order that we might experience true joy?

This morning's reading from Luke is often referred to as the *Magnificat* or Mary's Song; it is the hymn of praise Mary offers to God following her visit with Elizabeth. When she learns of what God has done in and through her very own flesh Mary is overcome with joy and sings:

***“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”***

In Mary's song, she tells of her Savior who has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...on the *lowliness* of his servant. The Greek here behind our English word is not talking simply about humility, but about poverty, lowliness. Mary is poor...dirt poor. She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess. But she sings with joy. Why? Luke knows, from the vantage of the end, that this lowly one, this wretched one, this woman, God raises up. Mary, despised and rejected, is favored by God and will bring the Messiah to birth.

And so she sings. What is more, Mary sings not just a solo about her own destiny, but a freedom song, a song of revolution on behalf of all the faithful poor in the land. She sings a song of freedom for all who, in their poverty and their wretchedness, still believe that God will act, that God will make a way where there is no way, that change, real, earth altering change is coming. Like John the Baptist, Mary prophesies deliverance; she prophesies about a way that is coming in the wilderness of injustice. She sings of a God who "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts"; who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly"; who "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." She exults in the God of Abraham; and she exalts the God of Jesus Christ. Here at the beginning, Mary rejoices in God's destiny for her, and for a world turned upside down."<sup>1</sup>

While the world is scrambling around trying to buy happiness, Mary sings, not a song of sentimental Christmas happiness, but a song of joy. She expects that things will be different; things will change through the birth of her son. *“My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”* She is

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<sup>1</sup> James F. Kay, "Mary's Song and Ours", *The Christian Century*, December 1997.

overwhelmed by the presence of God and is filled with joy at the mystery of the Incarnation, that God who set the sun, and moon, and stars in their courses, God who rules the vast universe, God who formed us from the dust of the earth and gave us life, God who called Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, that God had taken on her flesh and was about to be born into the world.

Mary sings God's praise for the change that God was bringing about by taking on flesh in her womb. In her Son - heaven and earth are united and the renewal of humanity and all creation has begun. In her child, God's Kingdom has come and God's will be done on earth as it is heaven. In her Son the world is forever changed, turned upside down. So Mary boldly sings of what God has done for the lowly, the dispossessed, the hungry and the poor, people like her, claiming that in her womb grows the one who will upend the kingdoms of this world and all their posturing and pretension. That her Son, God in the flesh, will be bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty, liberation for the oppressed, healing for the broken-hearted, and a Way in the wilderness for the lost. "There is no sentimentality to be found in Mary's song at all. This is a song of revolution, a carol that makes the likes of Herod fear for their very lives. Mary sings the music of Christmas because in her womb is the very Lord of all creation, God has come to Mary, and through her to Israel, and to all the nations."<sup>2</sup> Or as we sing at Christmas, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." And with that good news Mary joyfully sings.

As Bishop Will Willimon suggests, Mary's song says essentially, "This is the way God is: lover of the poor, protector of the downtrodden, savior of the lowly.

And we ought to get in step with God's way, or else be horribly out of step with reality now that the Son of God is taking over the world."<sup>3</sup> You see as Jesus' people, it is not enough that we take this beautiful song out each year around Advent and Christmas, dust it off and sing it a time or two. No, if we are going to be the ones who like Mary bear the promise of God into the world, if we're going to experience real and lasting joy and not just momentary Christmas happiness, then this must become the song of our hearts, the tune that underscores the drama of our lives, the lyric that narrates all that we say and do. If we sing this song with Mary then our communities, our churches, must become outposts of the Kingdom, places where the change that Jesus brings is lived out, communities in which the lowly are lifted up, where pride is scattered, truth is spoken to power, the hungry are filled with good things and those who seek only their own well-being are called to account.

You see real joy...real joy comes from being like Mary and humbly allowing the Son of God to come and dwell within us, to be born in us, not only at Christmas, but each and every day.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 128.

Following Mary's Son, is not a strategy for having a happy life. It might even break your heart. It did Mary's. The truth is we will only know the joy of Christmas, and this world will know the joy of Christmas, only in as much as we are willing to take up Mary's song, and sing it with our very lives. Now the gospel is true whether we sing it or not. But if allow God to take hold of our lives, to make us pregnant with God's presence, and to shape and form us into a new creation, then our very lives and the life and witness of the Church may become a living sign of the change and transformation that was born in Bethlehem's manger. Friends, we are not called to be a solution, we are not the Savior. We are, however, absolutely called to be a sign pointing to Christ who is the Savior of the downtrodden, the lost, the lonely, the despised, the hated, the ridiculed, all those for whom Christmas is anything but merry. What a tragedy it will be if our celebration of our Lord's birth points to the marketplace and not the manger.

We titled this sermon in our *Expectations* series, "Things Will Change." The truth is, a better title would be, "Things Have Changed." The world has forever changed...because God has come in the flesh. Mary knew it, and so she sang a song of joy. The shepherds and wise men knew it and they came and worshipped. Herod knew it and he tried to put an end to it. The disciples knew it and they gave their lives away to follow him. And we are called to do the same, to live with expectation, and differently because God has invaded and changed our world forever.

I know at times that change is hard to see. In a season that's supposed to be merry this has been a difficult week. It's hard to know what to say, what to think, how to be faithful. There are no easy answers. What I am sure of is that a faithful way forward in this wilderness is not political posturing, or hate-filled rhetoric, or even prayer if our prayers are just pious platitudes.

Our Lord expects more of us than that, this weary world needs us to be more than that, and Christmas makes that possible. Because Christmas is about a world turned upside down, about heaven invading earth, about the Light that overcomes all our darkness once and for all, and the radical change that has come in Jesus – God in the flesh. And because we are witnesses to what God has done our response to horrific events like we've seen unfold this past week, and to the suffering and darkness that confound us each and every day, our response can be that we take up Mary's song and sing it as if the life of this world depends upon it. Howard Thurman so beautifully put it,

*When the song of the angels is stilled  
 When the star in the sky is gone  
 When the kings and princes are home  
 When the shepherds are back with their flocks  
 Then the work of Christmas begins:  
 To find the lost,*

*To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers and sisters,  
To make music in the heart.*

From *The Mood of Christmas* by Howard Thurman

Maybe just then, it will be a Merry Christmas. Amen.