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The Heart of Christmas

Luke 1:39-56

By Matt Hook

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Our Christmas card this year consists of “the top 10 excuses why the Hooks didn’t get cards out last year.” The number one reason is “There is no excuse. Hopefully it won’t happen again.” Have you ever wondered why you can’t seem to catch up on anything? It’s almost halfway through December and many of us are 10 for 10 on the stress level. Have you ever felt so tired all you wanted to do was sleep, but you knew even a whole week of 12 hour nights could catch you up? And all the stuff that piles up any time you do try to catch up on some sense of normalcy threatens to overwhelm you all over again? And Christmastime seems to make it worse, doesn’t it?

Do you know what I think it’s from? I think it’s from a great lie that you and I buy in to. That may sound kind of random for the opening of a Christmas sermon on the Virgin Mary’s song, but I’m afraid it’s true.

I *hope* that you have come because you want to experience Christmas and the whole “reason for the season.” We all want a meaningful Christmas. We want to make it a special time this year. A special experience. A special connection. Unfortunately, this lie interferes. The lie makes integrating this experience of God’s love into our lives difficult to achieve. It leads us away from God. It leads us away from living deeper, more meaningful lives. I believe the reason we don’t experience God and his plan for our lives is because we’ve been fed this great lie that eats away at our very souls, leaving us deprived and depraved.

This great lie impacts our lives because of our very nature. Our goal based on the lie? To move up in the world. To have the freedom to do whatever we want whenever we want. We call it “upward mobility.” And upward mobility is the American dream.

This great lie has been given a boost over the last 50 years, as consumerism has become the dominant theory of our society. Consumerism is what much of our society is based on. This economic theory is that a progressively greater consumption of goods is beneficial. We are fed a steady diet of this theory from birth, through ads and commercials. Madison Avenue has been applying psychological research to manipulate our habits and behavior. This phenomenon has only fed our desire for the American dream, to be free to be served, so we can do what we want. How many of us have gotten into trouble because we have been programmed to consume? And whether or not we have gotten into financial straits, how much of our souls have been stolen away by the emphasis of loving things and using people, or how much of our lives have been wasted climbing the ladder of Madison Avenue success? You know what I’m talking about. How often do you pre-judge someone because they are out-of-style? The urge we constantly have for the next dollar, the next new item, the next upgrade. Do you see how deadly subtle it is?

Simply put, it is this: *Those who are being served the most, are the most important. Or the greatest of all is served by all.* Entire industries have learned the monetary truth that those who do the serving reap the most benefits. Most of us *want* to be taken care of. It makes us feel important. Let's face it. In this world, the businesses that can offer the greatest number of services to their customers will win the lion's share of the market; they will reap the greatest reward.

You and I need to learn this truth on the spiritual level, because this is the heart of Christmas. Yes, self-emptying service is the key to the depth of the Christmas story. Not gifts, friends, family, pageants, carols, lights, traditions, food, TV specials, shopping, Christmas cheer, or memories. All those parts of Christmas that we enjoy are the results of the main truth that Paul writes to the Philippians: "*Christ Jesus...emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of humanity, he humbled himself to the point of death*" (Phil. 2:5-7). What a sacrifice!

God came to earth as a little baby. Jesus Christ was on the ultimate trip of downward mobility. It means Jesus Christ gave up all the benefits that being the Son of God merited. He was worshiped eternally by the angels who were created for no other reason than to praise God. 24-7. Jesus Christ was never created - Christ is eternal - before anything that was created. He was never born. It is true that the scripture says Jesus Christ is the first-born of all creation, but that means he has the rights of the first born. He has inherited all of creation. Christ has rights to all of creation (Col. 1:15-20). All things were created through Christ, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. He holds all things together in himself, just by the nature of who he is! He was there, one with God, before the creation of space itself; before the sphere of time was created. He was there at the beginning of the creation of the universe: the stars, the sun, the first life on earth, the first human. He was a part of every aspect of creation. He was one with the primal force of the universe. And Christ, the Messiah, came to Mary.

This month we've been following Luke's account of how God set the stage for the earth-shattering event: First, the elderly priest Zechariah and Elizabeth his wife hear from an angel they will bear a son, who will help prepare the way of the coming Lord. His name will be John. 6 months after that, Mary is visited by the angel to tell her she will be blessed to bear the Son of God. God is at work setting up His way of salvation for all people. And that's where we pick up this morning, in Luke 1:39-56.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" 46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name. 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." 56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

THE MESSAGE: Luke 1:39-56 *Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth.* Elizabeth, her elderly cousin, who was 6 months pregnant with the baby who would become John the Baptist, greets her and is filled with God's Spirit.

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! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel: he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now."

In Mary's famous song, known as the Magnificat, she sings many Hebrew Scriptures. She praises God for his faithfulness, his power, his holiness, and his mercy. Mary knew God cares enough for the humble and the hungry to reach down and to meet human need. (even ours). She had a clear vision of who God is. She knew God as One who cares enough to act.

It's actually revolutionary. Her song is that God totally changes the order of things. God takes that which is on the bottom; and turns everything upside down, and puts the bottom on top and the top on the bottom. God revolutionizes the way we think, the way we act, and the way we live. Before God's revolution, we human beings were impressed with money, power, status and education. We were impressed with beauty, bucks and brains. But God revolutionizes all of that. God turns it upside down. The poor are put on the top; the rich are put on the bottom. It is a revolution; God's revolution. The Magnificat clearly tells us of God's compassion for the economically poor; and when God's Spirit gets inside of Christians, we too have a renewed compassion and action for the poor. Our hearts are turned upside down.

So the big question for your life and mine this morning is: has God's revolution occurred in your life? Have things been turned upside down where your life now is dedicated to helping the poor? When Jesus began his ministry he had a special message to the world about the poor: His first words in public were "*I have come to proclaim Good News to the poor...*" His sermon on the plain began with "*Blessed are the poor, for they see their need for God...*" and in his most famous parable of the Prodigal Son, the turning point for the prodigal was when he asked himself "*How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough to eat?*"

It's a revolution. No less revolutionary today than during Jesus' time. Has this revolution occurred in your life? It's the heart of Christmas.

What's really interesting is how *Mary reacts* to all this. What if we were to react just like Mary? First, if we understand the true meaning of what has happened, (Word becoming flesh), our hearts at Christmas will be filled with joy and singing and hope, like Mary's. Our message is not that God is mad at us—God loves us! Second, we should be making God famous, rather than focusing on so much trivia of people. Can you focus on God's greatness, in spite of all the competing noise? Third, if we truly understand the heart of Christmas, we should be moved—to humility, not pride. We've received from God the gift which makes every other gift seem puny by comparison. We've received a new start, a new life, and a new hope. Life-changing grace! Fourth, we must find ways to share the message of God's love with others. There are too many people today who feel forgotten, unappreciated, and unloved. Because of Jesus, the heart of Christmas, we can help them know that

God is crazy about them! Nothing does it like having them over for a meal. Look for an opportunity to touch people. For some people that live alone, they may only get touched once a week, here at church! Let's love in specific, tangible ways. That's the heart of Christmas. God became tangible and specific, full of downward mobility for us!

Let me repeat that lie that interferes with the heart of Christmas. Like all of Satan's lies, it's so powerful because it's based on such an incredible truth: The lie is: Those who are being served the most, are the most important. Or the greatest of all is served by all. Do you see it yet? That's you! You are incredibly precious! Infinitely special, because you are the subject of God's love! You've already been served the most, making you the most loved and most important person on earth, because you've been served by God! If you were the only person on earth to love, God still would have sent His Son to earth for you. You are the reason Jesus Christ came to earth—whether you've honored God in the last 24 hours or not! Now, you might be saying “But didn't Jesus say something different to his disciples? Yes and no. Let's read Matthew 20:25-28

“Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus wasn't showing the value of people. He was showing the spiritual heart response to being valued! He was saying because you are so greatly loved, here's the secret—**blow the people away by serving everybody!** Not just the loveable people or good-looking people or important people—but even the poor and lowly and lonely!

Remember, it's not your activity for God that makes for right, no matter how much you do here at church or anywhere. God works inside-out. Jesus didn't come to create another external works-based religion. He came to fix the whole problem—love gone wrong. Jesus didn't come to earth to show us how to earn anything. He came to show us God's heart. A heart that is love.

Look around. This room is full of people Jesus gave up everything for. You can't be served in any greater way. You are the most important. So why not respond in the same way? By serving. After all, it is *the heart of Christmas*.