

Joy > Happiness

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Luke 1:39-55

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Pardon me if I am a little skeptical about Mary's Magnificat. It just doesn't seem to fit with the circumstances. It would make more sense instead of getting joyful exultation here, we got Mary's Lamentation or Mary's cry for help. Think about it. On paper, she's just another statistic. Another unwed teenage pregnancy. Someone we are going to pass by and shake our heads about regarding the decline of Western civilization. Doesn't Mary know that she is now 50% more likely to drop out of school, live in poverty, and need support for basic needs? Doesn't Mary know, at least statistically speaking, that she will probably not graduate from high school, go to college, and the basic needs of her child are going to be at risk. It would seem that her words of praise and joy should be a bit more of a reality check, maybe even a forceful petition to God or plea for divine intervention rather than rejoicing and thanksgiving before God. It just seems irresponsible. With all the problems in the world and all the problems headed her way, it almost seems inappropriate that unfettered joy and praise are Mary's modus operandi before God. Is it really appropriate in this situation for her soul to cry out with a joyful shout? What right does she have to magnify the Lord and sing of God's blessings? And, if we want to go to the wide angle view and look at her life in the context of her child's life and ministry, there will certainly be joy along the way, but there will also be heartbreak, difficult family dynamics, a life of ministry and discipleship that both upturns and redeems Israel, and there is cross, capital punishment, a death, and a mysterious resurrection and second chapter, but if she knew all of that baggage and heartache was coming down the pike, don't you think she would celebrate a bit more prudently and contained, rather than magnify the Lord and rejoice in God with her whole being? She just seems out of balance. Off kilter. Not aware how hard, difficult, challenging, strange, mysterious, and transformative the life she is bringing into this world will be for humanity and all creation.

Maybe we need, I don't know, something like, let's call it a 'Measured Magnificat,' where Mary qualifies everything and says, I'm kind of excited and my soul partly magnifies the Lord but I'm also out of my mind scared about bringing a child into this world, I don't really know where Joseph is on all this at the moment, and I'm not sure I'm ready to have my own life upturned by this Savior I am about to bring into the world either. Also, I'd rather he not upset the balance and cause too much of a ruckus, couldn't he not exalt the lowly and humble the powerful, but just keep the machine running and not make too big of an entrance or cause too many ripples? But that is not the Magnificat we get, and to be fair, a watered-down Magnificat, a qualified Magnificat, is not what humanity fully alive before God looks like. Mary has no reason not to be weighed down

by the heaviness of life. She has no reason to not be weighed down by the burden she is asked to carry. She has no stable, comfortable, upper middle-class network to fall back on. She has no margin for error. Shouldn't we wring our hands over her lack of prudence. Shouldn't we give her some pre-natal preparation or at the very least help her to better understand the gravity of her situation. But none of that seems to weigh her down, her vocation is clear, she understands what she has been put on this earth to do, she is ready to fulfill God's purposes for her life no matter what, and she embraces it all with our whole being.

In an article several years ago in *Scientific American*, author Daisy Grewal began the article by quoting psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl who once wrote, 'Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.' The point of the article is that there is a difference between pursuing happiness and living a life with meaning and purpose. The author goes on to suggest that pursuing pure 'happiness is about getting what we [think] we want in life—whether through people, money, or life circumstances,' whereas meaningfulness, 'seems to have more to do with giving, effort, and sacrifice.' Grewal also suggests through these studies on happiness that our obsession with chasing happiness may be tied to a feeling of emptiness or a lack of vocation and purpose and that while money is able to buy happiness to some degree and make our lives more comfortable, what it cannot do is secure meaning, and in the context of our reading here in Luke, it cannot secure joy either.

Another conclusion in this happiness study makes the following assertion: 'happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided.' The point being that we think if we could have something, experience something, or acquire more of something we would be happier, but according to this series of psychological studies, it may be that what will complete us is not more happiness at all, but a life with purpose, meaning, and vocation. How are we living our lives to serve God's purposes? How are we living our lives to impact this world for Christ's sake? How are we using our gifts in service to the Holy Spirit? These may be the questions that strike closer to the heart of who we are, why we are here, and why it matters. Part of the Greyfriars Kirk congregation in Edinburgh Scotland is an initiative called the Grassmarket Community Project. It arose out of a community mission and soup kitchen that had operated since the turn of the century serving the needs of the homeless and indigent members of the center city in need of a warm meal. But in the last 15 years it transformed from a mission meeting the daily needs of its guests to something more. They started a wood workshop and took reclaimed pews from churches and taught wood working skills. The wood creations would be sold in the shop downstairs. Clients were also taught textile skills like tartan weaving and made pillows, iPad covers, and various forms of Greyfriars tartan items that could also be sold in the gift shop and support the ministry. There was also a café in which clients worked and served and

learned catering skills so that they could use their skills and gifts to make a living. I remember the minister talking about the mission of this organization and saying that society and government are often good at warehousing people, helping find shelter or giving them resources and a social safety net. And people may sometimes fall through the cracks, but we have figured out how to warehouse them for the most part. But the church's mission, while it may overlap with warehousing initiatives, the church's mission is to help each person see that they have been blessed with unique God-given gifts to be put to use to the glory of God and in service to neighbor. Our mission is about not reducing human beings to being warehoused or allowing human beings to think that chasing happiness is all there is to life, but to help identify the gifts with which God has blessed them and to help put them to use for the sake of the world. And maybe to find a deeper joy than being warehoused by basic needs or chasing happiness will ever offer. I think Mary would understand. To be coopted by God's purposes, to be caught up in this divine intervention in the affairs of the world, to be hear the good news of the gospel and to know that God is at work through fragile human vessels like Mary to turn this world around, not only bestows meaning and purpose on a life, but gives us a deeper joy, that no matter what is happening in our lives or how improbable Christ's life may seem, we can live in this world with joyful abandon and work for a world where all creation uses its God-given gifts to magnify the Lord.

The first person to translate the New Testament from Greek into the English language, William Tyndale, sought to describe the word 'gospel' for his hearers who would be encountering the word for the first time in their native tongue. What exactly did it mean? Tyndale wrote, 'Euangelion (that we call gospel)...' This is a Greek word and signifieth good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings that maketh a man (or in the case of our lesson, woman's) heart glad, and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy.'¹ This gospel unbalances our world and our lives, this gospel enables Mary to see her life as a blessing to be used for God's purposes no matter the challenges and hardships and humble nature of her particular circumstances. On that note, I offer you one more figure who in his own way embodies such joyful acceptance of God's purposes and exaltation of humanity. He writes that 'the first twenty-four years of my life were years packed with fulfillment. I had no basic problems or burdens. Because of concerned and loving parents who provided for my every need, I sallied through high school, college, theological school, and graduate school without interruption. It was not until I became a part of the leadership of the Montgomery bus protest that I was actually confronted with the trials of life....late one night around midnight, after multiple angry phone calls with racial expletives on the other end of the line as well as more sinister threats, the young man 'hung up, but could not sleep.' He recalls that 'it seemed that all of my fears had come

¹ David Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 124.

down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point. I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed to God....at that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him....my uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.' And this young twenty-five year old minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. would continue to go forward and work for a world in which the honor and dignity of all humanity was upheld by the laws of the land.² His midnight encounter might not sound exactly like Mary's *Magnificat* but it led him to calmly face the uncertainties of the future with courage and to see God's purposes for his life beyond his own preferences for ease, comfort, and happiness.

During these days of Advent, may God help you put the gifts you have been given to use in these days...in so doing, may your own souls magnify the Lord...and in so doing, may you find more joy than you find happiness, fully embracing this world with your whole being, until Christ's kingdom comes.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p.508-509.