

Mary Visits Elizabeth: How to Experience Sheer Joy

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Advent: Visitations
Luke 1:39-55

Let me begin with a question, can you think back to a moment in your life where you experienced utter joy? Something happened and you felt complete and total joy – I’m talking about the kind of joy that you want to jump up and down and shout, the kind of joy that displaces every other emotion. If you are a follower of Christ, your only thought is “Praise the Lord”.

I can think of two moments like this in my life. Both of them were at weddings. The first was at my own wedding, when I saw Marlene come down the aisle towards me. Every other emotion and thought in my being evaporated and the only thing that was running through my mind and she was coming towards me was “Praise the Lord!” Complete and utter joy.

And I felt the same way years later when I had the opportunity to perform the wedding of my son to a woman who Marlene and I deeply loved and respected. My son, Daniel, and his bride, Melissa, stood in front of me. Again, that wave of complete and utter joy, sheer joy. Can you think back to any moments in your life where you said, “This is when I felt total joy?”

I want to share with you some photos that should bring a smile to your face. If you are listening to this message by podcast, you’re going to miss something here.

Photo 1 “Burst of Joy”

The first photo is a Pulitzer Prize winning photo from 1973 of a newly freed Prisoner of War from Vietnam being greeted by his family at the airport. The photo is named, “Burst of Joy”. And when you look at this photo, you can feel the energy and the sheer joy in the air.

Homecomings and reunions are times when we feel joy.

Photo 2 Soldier Mom hugging daughter

Here’s a Mom who is reunited with her child after serving in Iraq for 7 months.

Victories. Victories in sports, victories in war, victories are a time when people experience joy.

Photo 3 Nigerian Women's Track

Here's a great photo of the Nigerian 4x100 relay team. The Americans had just won the gold medal, and the Nigerian women were looking at the scoreboard waiting and waiting until it became official that they had won a bronze medal. It was the first Olympic medal for the Nigerian women. There are women who know how to celebrate, there's joy.

There's quiet joy.

Photo 4 Listening to a Heart

You know what this mom is doing? She's listening to the heart of her deceased son that was transplanted into the chest of this young recipient. She's hearing her son's heart still beating.

Sometimes the joy can be the result of a new discovery.

Photo 5 baby

Here's a baby that discovered that there's something really fun to play with at the end of my legs. I've got toes! Discoveries. Scientific breakthroughs, artistic or musical breakthroughs, discovering something out in nature, discovering a new way to solve a problem. Discovery creates joy.

What else causes people to feel joy? Love that lasts.

Photo 6 Russian Couple

Here's an old Russian couple who have been happily married for 65 years. I love the look on her face when her husband decides to kiss her.

People feel joy when they discover that they are wanted, after being unwanted.

Photo 7 Boy with sign

Here's a little guy. Look at these four pictures. "I was in foster care for 395 days, but today (October 10, 2014) I got adopted!"

I want to show you my all-time favorite photo of someone experiencing sheer joy.

Photo 8 Boy with shoes

Here's a little boy who rejoices after getting a pair of shoes. He lived in an orphanage in Austria following the Second World War. He's just been given a new pair of shoes by the Red Cross in 1946. Look at him holding those shoes. Gratitude will cause you to feel joy.

This is the last weekend in Advent. Advent is, in the Christian calendar, a time of waiting. It's a period of time when we're standing on our tippy toes, straining, looking forward to, and waiting for the joy of God; entrance into the world on Christmas Day. In the story we're going to read today, everyone is bursting with joy. The kind of jump up and down feeling of sheer joy. A woman named Elizabeth is brimming over with joy. Her young cousin, Mary, is filled with joy. Even the baby Elizabeth is carrying in her womb, a baby later known as John the Baptist, he's jumping up and down inside of her. Sheer joy, complete joy, and all the things they've hoped for and dreamed about are coming true. I've called this Advent message: "Mary visits Elizabeth: How to Experience Sheer Joy".

Luke 1:39–55 (NIV)

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 the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

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,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

As I said, everyone in the story is jumping for joy. This is what we read in Luke 1:44

Luke 1:41 (NIV)

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

And in verse 44:

Luke 1:44 (NIV)

44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

The baby being referred to is John the Baptist. Elizabeth, Mary’s older cousin, is pregnant with John. As Mary approaches, Mary is pregnant probably less than one month with Jesus, John the Baptist in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. At least, that’s the way Elizabeth interprets that jump inside. Elizabeth then jumps up and down for joy.

Luke 1:41–42 (NIV)

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!

In verses 46-47, even Mary is filled with joy.

Luke 1:46–47 (NIV)

46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

So I ask you again, what would cause you to experience utter joy? Joy that would make you feel like jumping up and down without inhibition. Maybe it would news that someone who you love who is sick is completely and totally healed. Maybe it would be a message that the job you always hoped to get was being offered to you. Maybe it would be the discovery that this person who you’ve been secretly in love with loves you too and wants to spend the rest of your lives with you.

The story that we’re reading here contains a wonderful song of joy that has been labeled, “The Magnificat”. The word Magnificat is Latin for the first three words in this

song. Mary says “My soul glorifies” or “my soul magnifies”. Magnificat is Latin for “my soul magnifies”.

This is the most ancient Christian hymn in existence and it’s one of four songs or hymns that we find in the first two chapters of Luke. Zachariah, John the Baptist’s father, sings a hymn in Luke 1:67 and following. The angels sing a worship song in chapter 2:13-14. And, Simeon, an old man in the temple, sings a hymn when Jesus is presented in the temple of the 8th day of his life to be circumcised. That’s in Luke 2:29 and following. Just a quick reflection here, it’s absolutely the case that not only are the songs that we read in the opening chapters of Luke way more filled with content than the ridiculous Christmas songs we hear in shopping malls. Alvin and the Chipmunks singing traditional favorites. Not only are the hymns that we find in Luke way more filled with content, they’re way more filled with joy. So, what produces Joy?

I think this text tells us what produces joy. Very simply joy is what we feel when we are blessed by God. There are three blessings mentioned in Luke 1. The first is by the angel who says in verse 28

Luke 1:28 (NIV)

28 The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

The second blessing comes from Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, in verse 42

Luke 1:42 (NIV)

42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

So we have the angel blessing Mary, we have Elizabeth blessing Mary and then we have a third blessing where Mary blesses herself in verse 48.

Luke 1:48 (NIV)

48 for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,

Why is it that people experience joy? Because we are blessed by God. God’s blessing results in our joy. So how has God blessed us? We ought to consider first what God has done for us.

God has done for us

Maybe as some of you look forward to Christmas you don't feel particularly blessed by God. Maybe you're struggling financially, maybe you don't have enough money to pay all your bills, maybe you're facing eviction or bankruptcy, maybe you don't have enough money to cover your utilities or medical bills, or your college tuition for next semester. Perhaps you don't feel blessed physically. I know we've been praying as a church for many of you. Some of you have cancer, others of you experience chronic pain, you have chronic back problems. Some of you have respiratory problems, you're struggling with being able to sleep. Maybe you struggle with mental illness. You may not feel yourself blessed physically.

At Christmas, we become painfully aware that some of us are not blessed relationally. We find ourselves, perhaps, at odds with our spouse. Some of you may be separated from your spouse. There are some of you who are going through a divorce. Some are at odds with your extended family and the pain of that estrangement from your family is especially acute around the holidays. This is the time of year some of us are painfully aware of loss. You've lost a parent or spouse, or a child or brother or sister. Someone won't be there at Christmas. Christmas often reminds us of the holes in our lives. So for those of us who don't feel blessed by God this Christmas, listen to what the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 1:3

What scripture says

Ephesians 1:3 (NIV)

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Paul doesn't say that God has blessed us with every material blessing that He could give us or every physical blessing or every relational blessing, but he does say that anyone who puts their trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior that God has blessed you with every spiritual blessing. There is nothing spiritual God has withheld from you. Mary was blessed as she anticipated Christmas, the coming of Christ into the world. And you, follower of Christ, are a blessed person this Christmas no matter what is going on for you financially or physically or relationally. You are a blessed person. It is appropriate at Christmas to count your spiritual blessings. You say, "Like what?" If you are a follower of Christ you can be blessed with a clear conscience. You don't have to walk around feeling torn up inside because of guilt over your past or over foolish choices.

1 John 1:9 (NIV)

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If you are a follower of Christ, you can have inner peace. The apostle Paul says in Romans 8:6

Romans 8:6 (NIV)

6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

If you are a follower of Christ, you always have God with you in every situation. You'll never be alone as you go through this world if you put your trust in Christ. Listen to the promise of God to you.

Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)

5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,
 "Never will I leave you;
 never will I forsake you."

Whatever you are going to face in the future, with God's help you'll be able to meet the challenge. Listen to the promise of Philippians 4:13

Philippians 4:13 (NIV)

13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (NIV)

You say "I'm not particularly blessed this Christmas." We not only have the blessing that scripture pronounces the blessings of what others say to us.

What others say

Look with me at verse 41-42

Luke 1:41–42 (NIV)

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!"

Being filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth begins to prophesy to Mary. She interprets the meaning of the baby's jump inside of her. When she spoke in a loud voice, literally she shouted, this is no polite exchange. Both Elizabeth and her baby are deeply moved by the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth is given a revelation about why they're moved. She pronounces a blessing upon Mary. In verse 42 it says,

Luke 1:42 (NIV)

42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

Literally, she says most blessed are you among women. It's a comparative statement. Now think about how the blessing of Elizabeth must have ministered to Mary. You see, Mary was pregnant and she was pregnant out of wedlock. In ancient Jewish culture, Mary would have been an absolute social outcast. She could look forward to her name being dragged through the mud for the rest of her life.

When the angel spoke to Mary and told her that she would bring forth a son, he didn't say anything about Joseph's reaction to the news. He didn't say "Mary, don't worry. I'll take care of Joseph, he'll understand why you're pregnant." The angel didn't say, "Mary, don't worry I'll take care of your parents. I'll explain to them how you're pregnant." He didn't say, "Mary, don't worry. I'll take care of what everyone in town is going to say about you. I'll explain that the baby inside of you comes from God." He didn't make any promises to Mary about how the news would be received by her fiancé, by her parents, by her community.

In fact, centuries later, in the Jewish Talmud there are references to Jesus being born as a bastard. The gossip about Mary continues for centuries. So imagine the experience of blessing when Elizabeth, her older cousin, the wife of a priest, a woman with religious credibility, says to Mary, "You are most blessed of all women."

You know, this word "blessed" that Elizabeth uses in v. 42 is a unique Greek word. The word "blessed" here is

Eulogeo

It is where we get the word "eulogy" from. It means to be spoken well of.

Eulogeo = Spoken Well Of

We offer eulogies at funerals where we speak well of the deceased. Here is what Elizabeth is saying to Mary. "Mary, you are concerned about what people will say about you. But let me assure you from the Holy Spirit that you will be well spoken of. God is going to do something to preserve your reputation. You are not going to go down in history as the mother of an illegitimate child. You may hear that now to some degree. But that's not the way the vast majority of people in history are going to refer to you. The vast majority of the world will not think of you as a loose woman. You're going to be well spoken of."

Have you ever been in a situation where people were gossiping about you? Maybe your reputation was being attacked. Maybe where you felt like you blew it. You felt horrible about yourself. And someone comes along who has real credibility and they look you in the eye and they communicate to you that you're ok with them. You're accepted and wanted and welcomed here. You anticipated rejection and you experienced

acceptance. You anticipated condemnation and you experienced forgiveness. You anticipated exclusion and you were met with embrace.

Let me speak pastorally, some of you who are listening to me right now. Some of you don't allow yourself to take in words of blessing when they're spoken to you by others. So you don't experience the fullness of joy that God has for you.

There is something inside of you that when people begin to speak words of blessing, they tell you how much they appreciate and value you, how wonderful they think you are. You push those things away, you close your heart, and you say that's not really true. Maybe you were raised in a home where your parents rarely praised you. They had the philosophy that if you praise a child they are going to get a swelled head. You find it really hard to believe and receive praise from others. Oh, friend, you're keeping yourself from blessing. As a result, you are keeping yourself from joy.

I would encourage you to open your heart. That when people are sincerely praising you, when you receive a sincere compliment – I'm not talking about flattery – I mean a sincere compliment, that you take that in as being a word to you from God, something the Lord wants you to hear. Take that blessing into your heart. Perhaps your rejection of those compliments are a rejection of the very blessing of God for you.

You say, "I don't feel very blessed this Christmas." We've considered what scripture has said about our blessing, we've considered what others might say to us in blessing us, but there is a third blessing we read here in this text – it the blessing that Mary pronounces on herself.

What we say

Luke 1:47–48 (NIV)

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,

Mary uses a different word for blessed than the one that Elizabeth used. Luke expresses her thought with the Greek word

Makarios = Happy

Now, I believe that when Mary speaks of herself as blessed, she is really creating an example for us of completing or topping off the blessing of the Lord. See, God can bless us with every spiritual blessing and he may even bless us physically, materially, relationally. And other people can say wonderful things about us and verbally bless us.

But you know, blessing is not fully filled out in your life until you are able to say about yourself, “I am a blessed woman.” Or “I am a blessed man.” There are a lot of folks who, in a false humility, really keep themselves from thinking of themselves as being blessed.

And I love when I hear people say, “You know, I am a blessed person.”

I have a friend who had seven children. I talked with her and said, “I heard you are having another child.” She replied with total excitement, “Am I not a blessed woman? Has God not shown me incredible favor?” I mean she was radiating and absolutely as sincere as could be. “Rich, I am blessed. I know the larger society says that children are a big headache and a curse. But I am one blessed mama.”

Can you say that about yourself? That you are one blessed person? That would be a great gift you could give yourself this Christmas.

So, where do we get joy from? I like what William Penn, the famous Quaker, said hundreds of years ago.

“The secret of happiness is to count your blessings while others are adding up their troubles” - William Penn

A psychologist named Dr. Martin Seligman tells his clients is to write a gratitude letter to someone they never properly thanked. You look back at your life and there was a music teacher or a school teacher or a coach or old boss or youth pastor, a relative, a mentor, someone who really impacted your life but you never properly thanked them. Prof. Seligman said that the thing you need to do is to write this person a gratitude letter express to them the difference they made in your life. How their encouragement, their kindness, their attention impacted your life.

Dr. Seligman said that scientifically just the act of writing a gratitude letter will increase your happiness and decrease any depression you may be experiencing. Another leading researcher in the field of gratitude, a professor at the University of California, Davis, a man by the name of Bob Emmons, wrote a book called *Thanks: How the New Science of Gratitude can Make You Happier*. He says that everyone should practice being thankful because its benefits are so powerful. Here’s what he writes in his book:

“First, the practice of gratitude can increase happiness levels by about 25%. Second, this is not hard to achieve. A few hours writing a gratitude journal over three weeks can create an effect that lasts six months, if not more. Cultivating gratitude brings other health effects, such as longer and better quality sleep time.” - Bob Emmons

By the way, a gratitude journal is simply taking time every day in a little journal to write down a quick note of something positive that happened to you. Some people actually carry one of these journals around, one of the moleskin journal books that you can pick up at Barnes & Noble, and when something positive happens they write it down. Again, if you're struggling to see how it is that you are blessed, you want to increase your joy – count your blessings while other people add up their troubles. Write it down.

This text not only talks about the blessing of what God has done for us, but the blessing of what God has done in us.

What God has done in us

God has transformed us. Look at verses 46-47 again:

Luke 1:46–47 (NIV)

46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

Mary says, “My soul, my spirit” – spirit and soul are just two different ways of talking about the immaterial core or center of your being. She's just using two different ways to talk about the same thing. She's not talking about two parts of herself. This part is rejoicing, that part is rejoicing – if you want a technical phrase this is called Hebrew Parallelism. Jewish poetry often repeated the same thought in slightly different words in the very next line. She's saying the same thing twice.

Mary is telling us something about what it means to be a Christian. She's saying, “When you surrender your life to Christ, what happens to you is that you don't just adopt a new moral code. Now I'm a person who subscribes to the Ten Commandments. You might adopt a new code of ethics, but that's not fundamentally what it means to be a Christian.”

Mary doesn't say, “Hey, let me tell you what happens. When I surrendered entirely to Christ, I started to go to church. I now take communion. I now read the Bible. I have new friends.” All those things may be true, but that is not fundamentally what happens to you when you become a Christian.

She doesn't say, “I have reformed my life. I used to be into some really bad stuff, I don't do that anymore.” That will happen if you surrender your life to Christ, but that is not the essential thing. Mary says, “My soul. My spirit.” She's saying that fundamentally, essentially, being a Christian means internal transformation. Christianity isn't just something you put on like a new sweater or a new pair of pants. It's not a new set of

behaviors or a new set of friends. Becoming a Christian means God gets ahold of you in the depths of your being. God enters your heart and He transforms you from the inside out. Your old inclinations and prejudices, your old viewpoints and attitudes, old resentments – all those things change. Has that happened to you? Has God gotten ahold of you in the depth of your being? The blessing of that inner change will produce joy. Who is it that experiences that blessing?

Luke 1:51–52 (NIV)

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.

Why does the whole Bible teach us that people that get transformed by God are people who approach God with humility? God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. Why does God hate the braggadocious, chest beating, and look-at-me, self-promoting, self-advertising, self-reliant type of person? Why does God reject that and instead say, “The one that I’m going to bless and transform is the one who comes to me recognizing their need”?

There’s a wonderful story a little later in the gospel of Luke in chapter 18. Jesus tells us about two men who go into the temple. One man is a tax collector, this tax collector is perhaps up all night thinking about his life, he’s thinking of what an utter mess he’s made of everything, he’s pacing around his house. He’s alienated his kids, maybe he’s on his third divorce. He can’t sleep, he’s conscience is killing him. He feels like he’s in a dark well, he’s drowning. He decides to do something out of character. Next morning, he gets up and he says that he’s going to the temple, a place I haven’t been in years. I’m going to go there for morning prayer because if I don’t get some help I think I’m going to commit suicide.

The tax collector is the utterly irreligious person who says, “You know what, I’m going to go to church this Christmas.” So, there’s this crowd pushing into this temple, this crowd entering the church and there’s this irreligious tax collector being pushed in with the crowd. He wonders if people are looking at him, he’s not sure how the service goes.

There’s another man, a Pharisee. He walks into the temple, everyone greets him. He’s comfortable, he’s confident in a religious setting. What’s so surprising in this story is who gets accepted by God. Both men pray. We read the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke 18:11

Luke 18:11 (NIV)

11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.

In his relationship with God, the Pharisee appeals to his track record with God. As I come before you, God, I reflect on what I've done and what I haven't done. You know, Lord, I've been trying my best, I go to church every week, and I give to the church. I'm deliberately not dating outside of the faith. I go to small group, I pray every day, I read the Bible, and I even listen to Christian radio. What does God hate when we appeal to our track record when we come before Him? What is so distasteful to God is not that a person has been faithful, as if faithfulness means nothing to God. Or that going to church, or sacrificing money is the same thing as using your money for an expensive vacation. The problem with appealing to our track record, the problem of pride is the notion that all that I've done, you now owe me, God. The unstated assumption is in light of all that I've done for you, in light of all that I've given up, you owe me. We may not actually say this, we may not actually pray over our track record or even bring it up with God, but very often, deep in our hearts, at the root so many people's bitterness toward God is the thought "after all I've done for you, God, after all my years of faithfulness. After getting my ticket punched over and over again and putting my quarter in the gumball machine, nothing has come out! I'm mad at you, God, because I'm still single. I haven't had a date in years. Or I'm still sick or my loved one is still sick. Or the job went to somebody else. My mother, my father, someone else is not being helped by you. You should be blessing me this Christmas, and you're not."

Friend, if you're bitter toward God, it's almost certainly rooted in pride. God, you owe me and you didn't pay up.

See, I want you to contrast the Pharisee's review of his track record before God with the prayer of the tax collector where he says in Luke 18:13: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Luke 18:13 (NIV)

13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Not, let me review my track record, but be merciful to me. The humble person never appeals to merit. The humble person always appeals to God's mercy – see this person understood the gospel. The only way I ever stand before you is mercy. Sheer mercy. The humble person comes before God and they say, "I owe my existence to God. The very way my DNA is arranged in my body, the fact that my lungs work at all, the fact that I can breathe, the fact that my kidneys work and I can go to the bathroom, the fact that I ate something and that I have clothes on, that I have a roof over my head, that I can take a shower – it's all your gift, God. And the only way I can come into your presence, the only reason you answer my prayers is the gift of your Son and his death on the cross for me!

Humility says that if I am one micron different than I used to be, if I have stopped partying or if I go to church, or if I have forgiven anyone, or if I pray, or if I am doing what they aren't doing, it is because of you and your mercy God. If I see anything in me that is good, if I have told the truth where I used to lie, if I serve in inconvenience where I used to manipulate my way out of things, if I have hung in in a difficult marriage, if I have been courageous, it has just been sheer mercy, always mercy.

This is the person that God blesses. This is the person whose prayer gets all the way up to heaven. That doesn't bounce off the ceiling of your room: "Be merciful to me." The person that God blesses, the prayer that God affirms is "God, you have been so good in the past. You have been so merciful to me, now please be merciful again. Be merciful to my daughter. Be merciful to my mother. Show me mercy again, sheer mercy, for no other reason other than you are a God who is rich in mercy. You aren't cheap. You aren't stingy. Father, you are a merciful father. Out of the abundance of your mercy, be merciful to me in this area. In my finances, regarding my rebellious child, in my desire for lifelong companionship, in the repentance of my loved one – not my merit. You don't owe me a thing. But out of your mercy, be merciful to me." That is the person who gets blessed by God.

You say you're not blessed this Christmas. Consider and count up what God has done for us. Consider what God has done in us. And, finally, consider what God has done around us.

What God has done around us

Luke 1:51–53 (NIV)

- 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.

You know the impact of the coming of God into the world on Christmas is not just an internal thing that happens in our heads. The coming of God into the world at Christmas is an historical thing. God's coming not only has an effect inside of us, God's coming has an effect around us. When Mary says

Luke 1:51b-52

- 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.

What Mary is saying is when God comes into the world, He deals with the bullies. All the people who push others around. All the loud mouths and braggarts. All the folks who abuse and use and mock and criticize. Why does Mary rejoice? Because the bullies finally are going to be dealt with. Have you ever been bullied in your life? Someone stronger than you, someone better connected than you, someone who had power over you, abused you. Have you ever been bullied? I'm so grateful for the anti-bullying movement that's been happening in America over the last 15 years in our public schools.

When I was six or seven years old, there was a bully on our street. He was easily a head taller than me and probably weighed 40-50 pounds more than me. He would take his father's tools, this really happened, out of his father's tool cabinet in the garage and he'd come up behind me and hit me in the back of the head with a level or a saw. One time he came up behind me with a hammer and hit me in the back with a hammer. Knocked me right to the ground. So, I went home crying, I told my mother what happened and she went down the street. She said to his father, "Listen, you need to lock up your tools because your son is taking your tools out and hitting my son with them. You need to lock them up." His dad said, "What I don't see I'm not going to do anything about." The classic bully raised by an enabling parent who won't deal with it.

One day, this kid, his name was Brett, he pushed my older sister. My sister was three years older than me and about Brett's height and my sister pushed him back. Then Brett tore her shirt and ripped a gold chain off her neck. My older sister just lost it. She punched Brett in the face, knocked him to the ground, sat on his chest and just waited on him. She bloodied his nose, blackened his eyes. All the kids on the street stood around and just cheered my sister Jayne on. "Hit him again!"

There's something so wonderful when a bully finally gets it. When an abuser finally gets his comeuppance. When a boss has been sexually harassing young women for years finally gets exposed and his reputation is shredded. When a molester is finally imprisoned. When a selfish, greedy person who injures others through their greed is finally punished. Maybe you've heard of Martin Shkreli. This former hedge fund manager outraged almost every newspaper editor in America a few weeks ago when it was discovered that he had bought the exclusive US rights to sell Daraprim. It's a 62-year old drug that treats a rare parasitic infection. Daraprim is the only approved treatment for toxoplasmosis. It's a disease that mainly strikes pregnant women, cancer patients and AIDS patients. Martin Shkreli decided he was going to raise the price of this drug from \$13.50 to \$750.00 per pill.

Headlines across the country called him America's most hated man. He loved it. He said "Maybe I'll raise the price even more." Hillary Clinton called it "price gouging", said that his behavior was outrageous. Donald Trump called him a "spoiled brat". He laughed it off. And, then, just this week Martin Shkreli was charged with securities fraud and conspiracy. He had manipulated investors through a web of lies and deceit for years cheating people out of millions of dollars. He's facing 20 years in prison.

What do you think the folks who couldn't afford their medication when it went from from \$13.50 to \$750.00 per pill, how do you think they felt when they read that the man responsible for their misery was now facing 20 years in prison? Jesus Christ is always on the side of the weak. If you want to know in a dispute what side Christ is on, Christ is always on the side of the abused. Christ is always on the side of the weak. Christ is always on the side of the marginalized. Christ is always on the side of the person who is being stepped on. That's why Christ is always on the side of the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. The person who is being pushed around, who has nowhere to look other than to Jesus Christ. He is on their side.

Friends, if you want to experience joy this Christmas, stand with Jesus Christ. Extend care to those Christ cares about. Help those who are being bullied, those who are struggling, and those who are overwhelmed by life. God will bless you, and you in turn will experience His joy. Let's pray.

Mary Visits Elizabeth: How to Experience Sheer Joy

Rich Nathan

December 19 & 20, 2015

Advent: Visitations

Luke 1:39-55

- I. **What God has done for us**
 - A. What scripture says
 - B. What others say
 - C. What we say
- II. **What God has done in us**
- III. **What God has done around us**