The Forgotten Virtue of Christmas

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 December 2023

Preacher: Dr. Michael Staton

[0:00] Open your Bible with me this morning, if you would please, to Luke chapter 1.! Luke chapter 1. We're going to spend this week and next week looking here in Luke 1, verses 39 to 45, under! the heading of the forgotten virtue of Christmas. We often talk rightly so at Christmas about things like love and hope and peace and joy as we should. There is another element that is a virtue that comes right from the Christmas story that I want us to consider these next two Sundays. It was 1998, Marcy and I had been married for a couple of years. We began to pray for the Lord to bless us with a child. And we began to pray in January of that year.

We found out in June, about six months later, that Marcy was pregnant with our first child. We were excited. We were nervous. We were anxious. We were thrilled. And mostly we were poor.
And while Marcy was busy trying to think of how do we make this room a nursery and what do we need to buy and what needs to go in here to make this the perfect place for a baby, I was pretty consumed with wondering how in the world we were going to be able to pay for diapers and one more mouth to feed. We were, of course, excited to tell people and let them know about it.
But we chose to wait as long as we could. I think we made it about 12 weeks before we told anybody. And when it came time that we decided we were going to let people know, it was a lot of fun to think of how we would do that. Now, remember, this is back in the dark ages.
So there's no Facebook, no Instagram. So to tell someone you're pregnant back then, you've got to do it one at a time. These are a lot of individual conversations. No such thing as a big announcement on social media that is seen by everybody who knows you. And so we got some pictures that we took to get developed. So if you're older, you don't know what a QR code is, ask the kids. If you're a kid, you don't understand what I mean by get pictures developed, ask a grandparent, all right? We'll help us all figure out what we're talking about today.
[2:35] We had a stack of pictures, got them developed, and they were in that little folder. You guys remember getting the pictures from Modo Photo or wherever you took to get your pictures developed? And we just had a little picture of the sonogram tucked in the middle of those pictures. And so we would show parents and friends and people at church, and we would ask them to look through these pictures. And people are like, this is great, Michael. Great, Marcy. Great pictures. Great family.

Why are we looking at your pictures? And then eventually, I'd come across to the picture of the sonogram with the baby. And that was kind of our way of telling people that we were expecting a child. And people celebrated with us, of course. They were excited for us, and they would congratulate us and encourage us and be able to come alongside us to make this such a special occasion.
And probably for most of you in the sanctuary, you have a similar story. If you've been blessed with a child, you know what it was like to tell people when you were pregnant, you know what it was like to have people support you and encourage you and celebrate with you. But the same cannot be said for Mary.
Back in the time of Jesus being born, her situation would have been far different than what I experienced. When she would tell people the situation of her pregnancy, it would be met with all kinds of strange looks and confusion.
Some thinking she was out of her mind. Some thinking she was lying. Some thinking it was evident she had been unfaithful.
[4:22] She, of course, she had been told by Gabriel that she was going to have a son. And that that son was going to be the very incarnate son of God, the Redeemer promised since Genesis 3, spoken of through the prophets, is going to be now given to the world.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

And she would be his earthly mother. She would no doubt have been excited, but certainly would have been beginning a very difficult journey.
Trying to tell people that you're pregnant. Remember, she was betrothed, but they were not married. It's an important distinction. For her to be pregnant at that stage would have been not only a great shame to her and her family if people did not believe her, but Joseph, as we know from the Christmas story, could try to have her put away.
Some would think she was delusional, and far worse would be the accusation of being unfaithful. She's going to receive this word, and she's going to travel, and she's going to go see her relative Elizabeth.
She's going to stay for a couple of months, and while that may sound a bit extreme to us, to go and to visit somebody and stay for an extended amount of time, remember, in that era, it would have been very difficult to travel, and it would not be uncommon if you're making such a journey to stay for an extended amount of time.
[6:10] Now, by the time we get to Luke 1, verse 39, there have been two separate events of birth narratives that would have already been very shocking to read.

One is about Elizabeth, the other about Mary. And while they have some things in common, in other ways, they are very different from each other.
Elizabeth is much older, childless, barren, and now conceiving. Mary is young, betrothed, but not yet married, a virgin, and has conceived.
In both events, it's the angel Gabriel that delivers the news. Mary is told about this. You can look at verse 36 in chapter 1, says, behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.
Mary is going to get that information. She's going to leave immediately to go visit Elizabeth. Joseph. It would have been about a 70-mile journey from Nazareth in Galilee down to Judah.
[7:35] It would have taken three or four days for Mary to get there. Now, there are some things that when I read this story, my mind wonders about that we don't know.

Did Mary travel alone? She's a young teenager, traveling 70 miles. Did she make that journey by herself? Did some people, some friends, were there some family members who went with her?
If they went with her, did they know what was going on? Did they believe what was going on? Were they confused? Were they embarrassed? Did they go all the way with her to the house if they accompanied her and then turn and go back?
There are some parts of the story we don't know, some details that Scripture does not give us. But what we do know is that here is Mary who has heard from heaven and believes the message.
And she's going to go and spend some time with Elizabeth. Now, this is just a bit of a side note, but I do think this is important to catch.
[8:48] I think part of what we see here is the beauty and the joy of having relationships with people in different generations than you.

I think that's important. The Bible tells us of Elizabeth that she was in old age, according to verse 36.
things. We know that Mary was quite young. And yet there's a friendship, there's a bond, there's a relationship. I think that's important.
And I think that's a very important part not only of our lives individually, but must be an important part of life in the body of Christ. It's something that we just saw visually even tonight, today on the platform, as we saw elementary age children and behind me we saw middle schoolers and high schoolers standing right next to adults singing and worshiping together.
And that's purposeful, that's philosophical. That's not just something that happens once or twice a year, it's something all throughout the life of our church we try to build in that we want to see all generations in ministry together, worshiping together, blending their lives together.
[10:11] It's one of the reasons why on the Lord's Day we don't have services divided by different styles or music or preference because we don't want the church just meeting with people who look just like them and act just like them and think just like them.

We want to be a body of Christ that's blended together. It's critically important. And in your own life, it's important to have friends who are younger than you.
It's important to have friendships with those who are older than you. People that you can look up to and learn from and people that you can invest in and help.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

People who maybe have some experience and wisdom you don't yet have and also to have some people in your life that have some ideas and energy and vitality about them to keep us from just growing frustrated as we grow old.
This is an important part of the story. That here, Mary is going to see and stay with Elizabeth because of a closeness and a bond that they share.
[11:24] Mary has a lot to deal with. The joy, the excitement, the honor, and I would imagine about 10,000 questions as she walked that 70 mile journey that were flooding her heart and flooding her mind.

she makes it to the house. And we're going to look this week and next Lord's Day at three things we can do to help each other.
We'll look at just the first one this morning and I want you to notice first that our faith strengthens the faith of others. Our faith strengthens the faith of others.
In Luke 1, verse 39, it says, In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a town in Judah. And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.
And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
[12:45] And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. Verse 39 says it's in those days.
It means it's in the days right after Gabriel had announced what was happening. Mary arose, it says, and went with haste. She went quickly. She went immediately to see Elizabeth.
Now here's what we know. We know that Elizabeth is six months pregnant at this point. We know that Mary's going to go and stay for a couple of months.
And we know that she is there before John the Baptist is born. For all of that to work together, it has to mean that as soon as Mary is told these details in verse 36, she then makes arrangements to leave very, very quickly to go see Elizabeth.
[13:54] She comes in. She enters the house of Zachariah. She greets Elizabeth. Remember, Zachariah is still mute, offstage, so to speak. He's lost the ability to speak.

And verse 41 says that when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. Now, we're accustomed to hearing about babies moving in the womb, but this is something special. This is something unusual. Now, I can remember when Marcy was pregnant with our sons and we'd be on the front row, maybe during music of a church service, and Marcy would elbow me and she would say, look, and try to tell me you can see a baby, you know, the baby's arm moving and all these kinds of things.
And I, of course, have never felt a baby inside of me. I've seen a baby move. I've had my wife take my hand so I can feel a baby move, but that's just from the outside.
I've never had the thrill and the joy of what the ladies, the moms in this room have experienced of knowing this baby is moving inside of you. And while we are accustomed to hearing those stories and maybe even feeling a baby's movement, something is unique here.
[15:08] Something is different here. When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb, and it tells us at the end of verse 41, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, which is the only explanation the Scripture gives us of how Elizabeth knows what's going on and how to interpret what is taking place.

Elizabeth clearly feels a different kind of movement, something different than what she was used to. You could say that John got a kick out of Mary's arrival, or better yet, you could say Elizabeth got a kick out of Mary's arrival.
Mary comes in and she speaks a word of greeting and inside of Elizabeth, the baby who would grow to be John the Baptist, is moving.
And understand that sometimes it's, we come to the Scripture and we tend to think that the miraculous was just always happening, but that's not really the case. Miracles in Scripture are very limited in scope.
There's really just a couple of times throughout biblical history where miracles were very prevalent. And one of them is in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

[16:28] But remember, when you come to the birth of Jesus, when we come to the time of the New Testament, it's been 400 years since the Old Testament was closed.

It's been 400 years since God had given a fresh prophetic word that came to us through Malachi, the final Old Testament word.
It's been 400 years of what has come to be known as the silent years, not because God wasn't working, not because God wasn't still sovereignly, providentially doing what he does, but there's no new prophetic word in those 400 years.
And so at this point in time, when Elizabeth is pregnant and Mary is pregnant, this is not a time where people are accustomed to just seeing all kinds of miraculous things happen.
This is not a time where they are used to new words from God to his people. It's been four centuries since they've had a fresh word from God through a prophet to his people.
[17:38] And here is John the Baptist in the womb who will learn as we keep reading in scripture, his unique role is going to be to be the forerunner of Messiah.

And about three decades later, he will see Jesus and publicly say of him, behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
His job was to prepare the way, to point the way away from himself and to Jesus. In fact, one of the great statements that come to us from John the Baptist is recorded in John chapter 3 verse 30, where John the Baptist says of Jesus, he must increase and I must decrease.
because his purpose, his role, his place was to point away from himself and to shine the light on Jesus.
And that's actually happening even before he's physically born. He is moving in such a way that Elizabeth, according to the Holy Spirit, is able to understand that when Mary, the earthly mother of Jesus, comes in and speaks and when Jesus is inside of Mary, that John is already pointing the way.
[19:18] Luke 1 15 tells us John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb. Elizabeth says that John leaped.

Leap. And in the Septuagint, the Septuagint, remember, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. In Psalm 114, the same word is used there as is used here in Luke 1, translated leap. In Psalm 114 in the Septuagint, same word is translated as skipped. So this movement that John the Baptist makes is a very strong, a very active, a very forceful kind of movement.
Even before John the Baptist is born, he is pointing the way to Jesus. By the way, the word for baby used here in this text is the exact same word used later in chapter 2.
After Jesus is born, Scripture sees a baby the same, whether it's in the womb or having been born. There is no distinction.
[20:36] Human life is valuable. The value is not given one second after a baby is born. The Scripture sees the baby inside the mother's womb the exact same way, exact same term as a baby that's already been born.

And the text tells us in verse 41 that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. This is a Holy Spirit-inspired confirmation that she gives.
And all of this is all about faith-strengthening faith. How so? Well, just think of what these ladies are going through.
Both of them, chosen by God, blessed by God, honored by God. Both of them, given the privilege of giving birth to such influential babies who will grow to be such influential men.
You've got the forerunner of Messiah, John the Baptist, being born to Elizabeth. You've got the Messiah himself, Jesus, being born to Mary. This is a very, very honored gathering of two moms.
[21:56] And yet, their lives are now immensely complicated. And when Mary shows up to the house of Elizabeth and her husband, whatever they are experiencing, both ladies are faithful, both ladies believe, both ladies respond with faith, but both of them are desperate for other people to build their faith.

Why? Because what they are going to have to experience as a result of God's providential work in their life will demand faith and ever-increasing faith.
It's a little bit like how important it is for us to gather with God's people on the Lord's Day each week. You come in here because you believe.
Others come in here because they believe. But we need to strengthen each other's faith. That's critically important. Mary, who has had her life turned upside down, and Mary is as honored and

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

highly favored as she is, she in time is going to face the stares of those who don't believe her. She's going to hear the jokes of people who are critical of her. I mean, Joseph himself, before he is fully aware of what's going on, is trying to think of how do I put her away secretly.
[23:39] And if you fast forward in her life, or fast forward in her life 33 years, she is going to be there on the day that Jesus is crucified, and she's going to watch the son she gave birth to die as gruesome and gory and graphic and painful of a death as you can imagine.

Shortly after Jesus is born, she's going to have Simeon take her baby, hold him in his arms, and he's going to prophetically speak to Mary and describe how a sword will pierce her soul.
Mary believed, but she needs the faith of others to help her and to minister to her. Elizabeth, who has been barren and dealt with the struggle and the pain and the questions and the looks that have accompanied that, now also, blessed by the Lord, going to give birth to the man who is going to be John the Baptist, who is going to have this amazing privilege of pointing the way to Jesus.
Yet, here is Elizabeth, and why is it that we don't have words recorded here of what her husband is saying? Because he can't speak.
Because when he heard what was going on, his first inclination was doubt. Here is Elizabeth who believed, but her life is suddenly extremely difficult.
[25:23] And Elizabeth needs the faith of Mary, and Mary needs the faith of Elizabeth. It's just a picture of how even the faithful among us need each other to strengthen our faith.

And can you imagine for Mary, as she makes the turn down the street and she sees Elizabeth's home in view, and she's no doubt rehearsing how she's going to greet Elizabeth and how she's going to explain what she's been told, and you have to think in her mind, she's wondering, is she going to believe me?
Is she going to think that I'm out of my mind? Is she going to think that I've lied? Is she going to think, what is wrong with you? And can you just imagine for Mary, who has responded with faith, even though there's questions, and is embracing what the Lord has spoken to her through the angel, for Mary, when she goes into the house and she greets Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's response is, how blessed you are, the mother of my Lord, verse 43 says.
Elizabeth also believes the message from heaven, and for Mary, what a sweet gift of encouragement when Elizabeth's faith is joined with Mary's.
It's a reminder of how much we need each other. It's a reminder of how much your faith can bless somebody else, and how much the faith of another can strengthen you.
[27:07] And in this place, this Lord's Day, and every single Sunday morning, we come into this place, and of course, the first thing we want to do is worship Christ and make much of Jesus.

Absolutely. But in doing so, part of what we do as a church family is encourage the faith of others. This is in part why when the congregation sings, this is why you need to be a singer. Not only because Christ is worthy of it, but because your singing strengthens the faith of those around you. This is why it's so important that you have a Bible open when we study God's Word, not only because you need to learn what God is teaching us, but also because as your Bible is open, you are teaching and modeling and stretching and strengthening the faith of others who are around you. This is why as we engage in worship, we do so as a family, as a congregation. Yes, Christ is our focus.
[28:22] Yes, yes, the glory of Christ is our highest purpose. But there are people who come in here every single Sunday who need to have their faith strengthened.

And that happens when they look at people younger than them and older than them. Somebody who, like Mary, can look up to Elizabeth, someone who's older than her, and as Elizabeth believes Mary and responds in faith, Mary's faith is strengthened.
And somebody like Elizabeth who can look at Mary, someone much, much younger than her, and encourage her and help her and minister to her. It's just a picture, it's just a microcosm of the body of Christ and what we should be all about.
I mean, you saw a hundred children down here singing songs about Scripture and Christ and that should bless you and strengthen you.
And you see people in the choir who are 10 or 20 or 30 or 50 years older than you and that should encourage you. Just walk down the hallways of our church any given day and you see groups of men and women who are much older than our teenagers that are here studying the Bible and you walk down the same hallways and other parts of the day and you're going to see groups of

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

teenagers who are here together studying the Bible and you can see children and you walk through our preschool area you're going to see our youngest being taught the early principles of the Christian faith.
[30:23] And it's just faith strengthening to see people older and younger responding in faith to what the Lord is doing.

In verse 42 we'll get to this next week but it says she exclaimed with a loud cry blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb and why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me.
Here is Elizabeth already believing that Mary is indeed pregnant with none other than the very Son of God who would be her own Lord.
This is about faith strengthening faith. This is about a teenager and a lady well advanced in years encouraging and strengthening each other because they both believe the word of God.
And within the church that is what unites us. you don't need to go to a church where everybody is your exact same age.
[31:42] You don't need to be a part of ministries and Bible studies where everyone you're always with is just like you. There's a place for that for sure but don't make that the totality of your spiritual life.

You need to be around people older and younger. you need to be around people who know more Bible than you that you can learn from them and people who know less Bible than you so you can invest in them.
You need to be around people who have seen a lot and experienced a lot because when life gets difficult and you're tempted to have your faith rocked and shaken you need to have some spiritual mentors you can look up to and say I trust you to help me understand how do I go through this.
and you better have some people younger than you that you pray for and that you love and that you serve or else you're going to lose all hope and vision in this world.
In fact people my age and older if they just if we just talk to people our age it'll take us about 15 seconds to get to the good old days and about 15 seconds after that if it's just people our age and older to talk about all the doom and gloom of our world today and if people 50 and over don't have young people they're invested in they will quickly grow cynical and stagnant and if not careful a little bitter but if you're a part of a body of Christ how could you come here this morning and see a hundred teenagers and a hundred elementary students and think that God has stopped doing good work among us how can you watch that and see that and not think to yourself praise the
[33:57] Lord that there's people coming up younger than us that are a part of the church but if all you see if you're just Elizabeth and you just spend time with other Elizabeth's then all you're gonna see is the world from the view of the good old days were in the past but if our church were run by the children who were on these steps there's no bills getting paid and the lights aren't gonna work in about thirty days and it's gonna be a fun loud emotional place but there's no real spiritual rock and leadership there why because the younger people need the older people they need people to learn from people to invest in them people to spend time with them if you're a Mary a young teenager and you only have spiritual influence from other young

Marys your life may be really really interesting but it's going to be a mess why because Marys need Elizabeth and Elizabeth need Marys and part of what we learn just from the early parts of this just short paragraph just a small part of a larger narrative is how precious it is that Mary had Elizabeth to go to and that Elizabeth would believe the word from heaven and celebrate with Mary we'll look at this in more detail next week but one of the things that's astounding about this remember Elizabeth is pregnant too she's six months along her pregnancy is as unlikely to her as
Mary's was to her and what Elizabeth does not do is demand the spotlight be on her what Elizabeth does not do is say you may be pregnant but I've waited a long long time to be pregnant let's talk about me what Elizabeth does not do is say you know what you're a teenager you're supposed to get pregnant at some point I've been barren all my life I've never had a child and now I do let's focus on what I'm experiencing she doesn't do that and what we learn from Elizabeth is this forgotten virtue of Christmas namely humility it is amazing humility that
Elizabeth would joyfully not demand the spotlight rest on her but with thanksgiving and worship praise God for what he has done which is why 30 years later when Elizabeth's son John the Baptist looks at Jesus and says he must increase I must decrease do you see this all John is doing is living out what he learned from his earliest days from his mother humility it's humility that allows us to

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

worship it allows us to rejoice where God is at work it's humility that says it doesn't have to just be about what
God is doing in my life I can take time to celebrate what God is doing in your life that wherever God is at work is an invitation to praise and to worship and in a culture that has become as selfish and self centered and prideful as it seems I can imagine any culture being this is a good call and reminder for us at Christmas time to respond in humility he must increase we must decrease we must love those older than us and learn from them and we must invest in those younger than us and minister to them that's how the body of Christ works as believers gather together people who are faithful people who trust but admittedly who are imperfect and pray and sing and read and study and together our faith strengthens and sharpens each other as we learn to look away from ourselves and unto
[39:58] Christ and as we do notice love and serve those of all generations all around us we'll pick up with this next week and build further in what we learn Lord we do thank you for your word today and pray that you would use it to encourage our faith and to strengthen us and to help us may we be humble as we respond to your word and faithful as we seek to strengthen the faith of those around us in Christ's name we pray amen amen and amen and amen and amen and amen pozw pozw

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host