



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

December 3, 2017 - Jeff Bucknam

Mary's Song - (Luke 1:46-55)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

So, my anniversary, 24th wedding anniversary, is in a couple weeks, okay, so that's good. It's a long time, people [applause], come one, it's a long time to be...for my wife to put up with me. When I first met her, I was...I didn't think I had a shot. Let's be honest about it. I thought that there was no way that this, this wonderful person would want to be with me, so I duped her, and have kept duping her for a number of years. [Laughter] When I first got to know her, I had the emotions deep in my heart, that I wanted to express, but every time I wanted to express them –I'm pretty good with words, but every time I wanted to express them, they came out like, "Hey, you're great." [Laughter] "Um...I like you a lot." [Laughter] And I got to the point where I just didn't feel like that was enough, you know what I mean? And so, I went on a mission trip, we were dating, and I went on a mission trip to the inner city of Denver where we were doing some work with some of the homeless population there. During the evenings when we had some time to ourselves as a team, a lot of the folks would be playing cards, or other games, or talking, and all I could do was think about Jeanne. So, I wrote a couple of songs to her, that I will now sing for you. [Laughter] <Laughing> No way. I know like four or five chords on the guitar, like I played it at camp and stuff, but I slapped those five chords together in what, basically, sold me to her. Right? That moment of singing that to her...her eyes welled up with tears and thought, "I want to love you forever," and I was like, "Okay, this is worth it then, right?" Have you ever been before a magnificent mountain range or like an, immeasurable beauty...the love of your life, and something overcomes you, and art comes out. Even though you're not an artist, something comes out of you. Like, roses are red, and violets...you know, you have to write a poem, you have to sing a song, you have to paint a picture, you have to sculpt something! That's what happens in the face of majesty.

This happens all over the Bible. In fact, most of the great moments in Scripture are followed by songs, or poems anyway, that are written in Hebrew poetry, or whatever. You find this, for example, in the very beginning in the book of Genesis 2, where Adam is alone and God says, "It's not good for you to be alone," and so he puts him to sleep and he takes out of his side, he makes the woman. And he wakes up and the first thing he says is, "Whoa man!" But he's so enamored with this woman that he sings this song, he writes a poem. Genesis 2:23:

"The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman, for she was taken out of man.'"

Moses and the people of Israel, they come across the Red Sea. The biggest nation in the planet, the most powerful man anywhere, Pharaoh, hot on their heels, chases them into the Red Sea, and the Lord covers them over with the waters. They win this victory. Ten rounds of plagues, followed by what seemed to be an impassable sea in front, and the nation of Egypt behind, chasing after them. And the



Lord comes through, they come to the other side, and what do you do when you see something, or experience something that great? You sing. Exodus 15:1-2:

“Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.’”

In the face of great majesty, we produce art. That’s what Mary does here in Luke 1. She responds to the news about Jesus being born to her in the most awkward of circumstances, and that being confirmed now with her cousin Elizabeth, who then says, “Listen, the child in your womb, we’re both pregnant, and we meet each other,” and her cousin says, “The baby in my womb leapt for joy just at your presence, knowing that the one inside of you to be born to you is going to be the great king of Israel. Our deliverer.” And Mary then, having the words of the angel confirmed to her through Elizabeth knows it’s true and says, “I have to sing.” So she does in Luke 1:46-55,

“And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.’”

I want to look at this passage. Over the next few weeks we’re going to be looking at Christmas carols, and I don’t mean the ones that we sing, oftentimes at church or around this time of the season, where it’s on the radio. I mean the first songs that were sung about Jesus; Mary’s song, Zechariah’s song. So it will be a good time, they’re great passages of Scripture that extol the virtues of God in many ways. And so we’ll have a good time.

Today, here’s what I want to do, I want to do this in two stages. Number one, I want to make the point that there’s something about Mary, and number two that there’s something about God. Now, when I say there’s something about Mary, I kind of want to take a thirty thousand foot look at this, not just this passage, but the context of Luke 1, and show you what Luke is doing here to show you the character of Mary and how you and I ought to be like her. And secondly, there’s something about God. There’s a particular character trait of God that is identified in the verses that I just read, and I want to talk a little bit about that, okay? Something about Mary and something about God.

Something About Mary

Here’s the first of those, there’s something about Mary. I watch *Hogan’s Heroes* sometimes. Okay, there, I said it. Some of you don’t know what that is, that’s okay, it’s a show from the 1960s. When I was in seminary I watched it together with my good friend, I went to seminary with Kyle Meeker who currently is our pastor of discipleship. He used to come over for lunch time, and we could sit and watch *Hogan’s Heroes* together. And since then, I have secretly been watching *Hogan’s Heroes* over and over again. Love the show. It’s on this television station in Bellingham, and so I record it, and the commercials are all aimed at people who remember *Hogan’s Heroes* live, from the 60s, so an older



generation, and so the commercials are all a little bit funny. There was this one commercial though, usually I skip through all the commercials, but there's this one commercial that I *have* to watch when I see it. It's this commercial about a mop. Don't know what the mop's about, don't really care what the mop's about. But the commercial itself is awesome, right? There's lots like this, but this mop commercial's great. It opens up in the scene where there's this woman, black and white, right? Her hair's all over the place, right? She's sweating, and she's got this old, nasty mop, that looks like something that came from this old restaurant somewhere. She's bent over it, and she's scrubbing like crazy, and the voiceover goes, "Have you ever hated your mop?" And she goes, <panting> in this colourless world where it's only drudgery. "Well now, <high pitched> bling!" And it turns colour, right? Her hair is perfectly done, and she starts dancing around the kitchen with this mop. She holds up this mop, and it looks an awful lot like the other one. She's dancing around the kitchen with this mop, which I've never seen anyone with a mop do, right? "Now, there's the super mop!" The reason I like it is because it illustrates the power of comparison. How do you talk about a mop? Like, how do I get you to want the mop? Well, I have to show you that this mop will make your life beautiful and make you want to dance. As compared to the old drudgery. The colourless world, and now this is the colourful new mop world. The power of comparison. When you juxtapose two things side by side, you can elevate the virtues of the one. As opposed to the other. In Luke 1, what you've got is you've got this kind of juxtaposition. You have this kind of comparison and the power that comes with it. And Luke is writing about Zechariah on the one hand, and Mary on the other. Zechariah, that black and white drudgery, and Mary, in full colour.

Now we're going to do a little Bible study here. What I want is to read you the story about Zechariah and then I want to read you the story about Mary, and I want you to notice, see if you can figure it out, the chief difference between them. Why is Luke putting these side by side? Okay? So here's first, black and white Zechariah. It's in Luke 1:5-7,

"In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron [Aaron was the priestly line. So they have, like, priestly bluebloods here, husband and wife]. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."

So there's a problem here. You don't say about people in this day, the way that they viewed it, you don't say about people that on the one hand they were blameless and did all the commandments of the Lord, and on the other hand were childless. The fact that you are childless in your community would have been a sign that you were not blameless. The goal for a woman in these days was to have kids and crops, and a lot more kids than crops if you can. You're a great woman if you've got, like, 15 boys. You're nothing in your community if you have no boys, and especially if you have no kids. It's a sign that God's not really happy with you. Why is he not happy with you? Well, you've got some private sins. You don't invite childless couples over for dinner, because they're not the kinds of people that you want to associate with. You want other people to think well of you, so you don't mix with those types. So Zechariah and Elizabeth are not your model Israelites. They are on the fringes, they are pushed to the margins of the community. They're very old, this has been their life all these years. Prayer after prayer after prayer has gone to God. "Oh please, give us a child and heal our disgrace." But here they are, and Zechariah's about to go and serve the Lord in the temple. Luke 1:8-10:



“Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty [his priestly division] and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.”

This is like winning the lottery for him. So his division, it was their month to look after the temple, and to look after the sacrifices, and within his division, like one hundred thousand priests or so, in all of Israel, and his division was a little bit smaller. And he wins, you know, his lottery number has come up, and he gets to go and offer the incense very near to the Holy of Holies, where God dwells. This is like, you’ve been chosen to sing at the Super Bowl! You’ve been chosen to go light the incense near the Holy of Holies. Oh, by the way, if you mess up, uh, God might kill you. [Laughter] He’s very particular about how things happen near the Holy of Holies. You’re getting into very holy ground there, and so don’t do anything wrong. If you’re in there for too long, we might assume that, you know, something happened, so be prepared. So, a lot of preparation goes into this, right? The big moment, he’s walking out, right? To the fifty-yard line, ready to go. Luke 1:11-25,

“Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’”

Zechariah asks the angel, [“Umm, how can I be sure? Cause here’s the deal. I’m really old, and I understand you wanting to now give us a child because I’ve asked for that all these years, my wife has asked for it as well, and had you come earlier, it would have been far better than having come now. So I appreciate you coming, but you’ll have to excuse me for having some doubts about the wisdom in all of this.”] ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.’

The angel said to him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.’

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. [<whispering> Maybe he’s dead.] [Laughter] When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. <tries to act out what happened> [Laughter]

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ‘The Lord has done this for me,’



she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.’”

Okay, so, there you have Zechariah, and his response, in particular to the Word of the Lord. Which is, “Are you sure that this is the right way, God? I mean it probably could have been done a little bit better.” Here’s Mary, <high pitched> bling! Here comes Mary. Luke 1:26-28:

“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. [Well, it’s a royal line. What, fourteen years old, fifteen years old, she’s betrothed, is the word here, she is promised to her boyfriend, fiancé. The way it worked in those days is that you tried out marriage for a year *without* sexual relations, to see if it’s sort of going to take. You can get out of it, in this betrothal period, but still a virgin.] The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’”

Now I know a lot of fourteen and fifteen-year-old girls, God bless them they’re all wonderful, but I probably would never approach them and say, “You are highly favoured!” [Laughter] What? What? What about her makes her favoured? Fourteen years old, she lives in the middle of nowhere, she is the definition of a nobody. Now an angel’s showing up and saying, “You’ve found favour with God.” Luke 1:29-33,

“Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. [‘I’ve not heard this one before,’ she thinks.] But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.’ [So, she asked a question too.] ‘How will this be,’ she says, ‘since I am a virgin.’”

Now her question is not doubting the angel’s ideas here, her question is one of mechanics. “Okay, so, my mom sat me down and gave me a book, you know, *Where Did I Come From*, and it had pictures and all. And what you’re saying, angel, does not accord with that. Right? The birds and the bees and all those rules that I learned –what you’re saying isn’t going to happen. Because the only way that I can understand that this would happen is that Joseph and I would, you know, and so how is this going to happen?” Luke 1:35-37,

“The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.’”

This is going to cost this woman so much. Every Christmas we kind of rehearse this, I mean...nobody’s going to buy this. You know when she goes out and she tells all her friends, “Well, the angel came and told me that God’s spirit is going to, you know, come upon me and I’ll be pregnant.” <laughs> That’s a good one Mary. Everybody knows how people get pregnant, everybody knows that she and Joseph are betrothed to be married, everybody knows that if she becomes pregnant it’s because Joseph and her broke the rules, and breaking the rules in this society means you get pushed to the margins. So Mary, if you received this word from the Lord, it means that for the rest of your life you will be thought of as



being *that girl*. You might as well hang a scarlet letter over your neck. Her response to this change in her future? Luke 1:38,

“I ‘am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’” Then the angel left her.

These two stories, they come together when Mary and Elizabeth see each other, and Elizabeth says, “The child in my womb leapt for joy,” and she confirms to Mary that what she has heard from the angel is true, and then Mary sings this song. Why does Luke put these people side by side? What is different between Zechariah and Mary? The answer to that question is pretty simple. Mary welcomed the Word of the Lord. She was willing to submit to what God’s plans for her were. She was willing to submit to God’s will in her life. Zechariah had some questions about the wisdom of it all, but Mary was like, “You know what? Let it be to me as you have said.” This, by the way, is a mark of true Christian discipleship. Those who are real followers of Jesus have as their posture a welcoming of the will of God. Not a fighting back, not a pushing back, not a, “How dare you, I’m not going to do it your way, because I’m the one who is better suited to plan my life out than you are, God,” but a welcoming of God’s Plan B, Plan C, Plan Q. It’s a mark of the real believer.

I don’t know about you, but I struggle with Plan B, C, and Q. I struggle in the big things and I struggle in the little things. Years ago, I was taking a team of high school kids to Chiapas, Mexico, from Washington State. I was a youth pastor, and I had organized for the last six, eight months, that we’re going to go and they’re going to visit this missionary there. We’re going to do some building projects and we’re going to do some children’s ministry. Twenty kids wanted to come, ranging in age from about fifteen to eighteen, so I’m like, great, this is going to be fantastic. I had all the things planned. I had communicated with a friend, though, who had traveled a few years prior to Mexico, and I said, “Do I need to get passports for these kids?” And the friend said, “No, you don’t need to get passports for the kids, you just need a birth certificate and a signature from their parents on a document saying you have permission to do this.” So I’m like, sweet, this is great. We get on the plane, we fly to Texas where we’re going to switch planes and go to Mexico, I get my name called over the loudspeaker while we’re in the departure lounge. “Can, um, Jeff Bucknam, the leader of the party of twenty-something, come up here.” And I thought, sweet, first class! [Laughter] And I walked up and I said, “Yeah, I’m Jeff.”

“You have your ID?”

“Yup, here it is.”

“Does your party have any travel documents?”

“Yeah, they’ve got their birth certificates and the signed napkins from their parents, you know.”

[Laughter]

The lady laughed at me, <high pitched laugh> “No, I mean travel documents, like official ones. Like passports. Do you have passports?”

“No, I was told that I didn’t need them.”

“Who told you?”

“My friend.”

“Your friend’s stupid.” [Laughter]

“Well, what am I gonna do?”

“You’re probably gonna go home.”

“What? *What?* Go home –wait a minute, we’ve phoned in all the planning, and all this stuff –”

“Listen, okay, look, I know a guy, [laughter] let me make a phone call, down to Mexico City.”



So she did, she made a phone call down to Mexico City, talked to a friend, it was actually a woman down there, and she said they talked to each other, and this lady in Mexico City at Immigration said “I’d be willing to admit these people, if they make sure they communicate with me and connect to my line when they get here.” So she hung up, and said, “We’ve made arrangements, you can get on the plane and you can go there, cause they’ve said that they’ll admit you, but you need to understand, sometimes things change down there, she might actually have to go home, right, and her shift is done, and if somebody else comes along, and they don’t want to admit you, and that’s just –that’s on you, buddy. So, if you’re going to fly there, you might actually have to fly back immediately.” So, I’ve never prayed so hard on a flight ever. “Oh God, please make it happen. Kids, everyone’s gonna pray, there’s a good chance we’ll have to turn right back around. Everybody’s gonna pray.” A couple of kids were freaking out about, <high pitched> “Oh no, we’re going –” <breathing heavily> We get there, there’s a lady in the immigration, and she waves this way, and I’m like, “Oh, you must be...” she says, “Yes, come through here,” everyone comes through here, there’s one girl, though, from our team, who is so freaked out, that she plops right down on the floor and she starts wailing, <crying> [Laughter] Just the stress is too great, first time she’s ever traveled, really, anywhere. <crying> <whispering> “Get up! Get up! Get up!” Other immigration people are coming over, “What’s going on here?” “No, no, no, no, no, there’s no problem, right, she’s just a little psycho, right? Just go away!” [Laughter] She gets to the other side, and she’s still crying and wailing and sitting on the end, pouting in the corner. “I don’t like it here!” Okay, we get on a bus, seven hours. I thought it was only going to be like three, two, it’s like –takes forever, they’re going up through Guatemala and back. [Laughter]

We finally arrive at this location exhausted. Everyone’s exhausted. The dormitories at this camp had been closed up for, I don’t know four, five months, because they have summer camps, and this was not that particular time, the time of the year where they...so we went down, the kids went down to the dormitories with some of the leaders, they open the doors to the dormitories, I’m talking to the missionaries up with at the main compound. They open the door to the dormitory, and they said it was like a plague of frogs that came out, just frog after frog after frog coming out. [Laughter] I hear the same girl who had been sitting on the floor, <screaming> “Ahhhhhh!” She comes running up, <high pitched> “There are frogs everywhere! I hate Mexico!” And then right on her heels are some of the guys, one of them has his shoe off, right, and his shoe’s off like this, and he’s running up, and he’s saying, “There are scorpions too! I’m going to kill them all!” He turns around and runs down. “Oh my gosh.” [Laughter] Missionary says to me, “Oh, we probably should have cleaned those out before you got here.” You think? You think? [Laughter] We swept them all out, we had brooms and we were sweeping out frogs and scorpions out of the door. We went to bed that night, and I was laying in my bed, I remember, honestly, I was laying in my bed, “What’s on my foot?” [laughter] Right? So, I was saying, “You jerk, God. What... what are you doing? It’s not really that hard for you to follow the plan, right? I mean, why does everything always have to go –if I plan it, I guarantee it’s going to go sideways. Why can’t you just do –” You ever sat in the bed like that? You ever been in those moments where you just say to yourself, in whether it’s little things or big things, whether you hear a word from the doctor or the bank, or whoever, and you’re like, “You jerk.”

This is my challenge as a Christian, more than any other. To trust the wisdom of God when everything goes pear-shaped. And there are two postures that I tend to have. It’s either one, shaking my fist at God, or the other one, which is, finally, receiving from the Lord. Those two postures... there’s a woman named Elisabeth Elliot, her husband died, he was a missionary in South America, he died in a riverbed



as a martyr. Elisabeth Elliot was asked, later on in her life, to write an article describing how is it that she's lived her life in submission to the Lord. Given all the circumstances and things that have gone wrong in her life, and the ways that she would have planned things to go differently, how have you lived this way? In it she said, "In the Scriptures there are two women. Mary and Eve. Eve's attitude towards God and his Word is one of rebellion and shaking her fist at God, 'I don't like your plans, I don't want to listen to what it is that you have, my plans for my life are better than yours. I want the knowledge of good and evil, I don't want to wait for it according to your plans, I am going to reach out and get it. Give me what's mine. How dare you, you jerk.' And then there's Mary, who is thrust into this circumstance where her whole future is going to be very different than what she had planned. And what's her response? Open-handed, 'I'm your servant, let it be to me as you have said.'" Elisabeth Elliot's question in her article was, which are you? Because everybody's faced with these moments. Everybody's got scorpions crawling around on the floor, literal or metaphorical. In those moments, which are we? The mark of a true believer is an open-handedness to God's wise plans. Something about Mary.

Something About God

There's also something about God. I want to look now at the passage itself, okay? And when I read this again, I already read the song that she sings, when I read it before I didn't ask you to notice anything in particular. But this time, when I read it, I just want your ears to be perked for words that have to do with humility. Just notice how, when she sings songs about God and how great he is, how she's pointing out particularly how God exalts the humble and he dashes the hopes of the proud. Here's the passage, Luke 46-55:

"And Mary said, 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, [The humble one, he will call blessed. All generations will.] for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.'"

Basically the songs is, "I glorify the Lord because he's reversed everything. Those who have no importance are now at the top of the heap, and those who everyone shines the light of glory on are now underneath all of us. God is one who uses and gives grace to the humble, but he opposes the proud.

I don't know if you've ever stopped, during the Christmas season in particular, and just thought about the story of the incarnation. The "incarnation" is the theological word we use to talk about God becoming man. And how all of it is shrouded in humility. This time of year, that's what the Bible is saying to you over and over again, "Oh, God is humble, God is —" which is crazy, how could God be humble? How could God honour the humble? Then every year, we get a chance to just reorient our minds around this. So, just think about it for a minute. The people involved here are humble. I've already made this point, Mary, Joseph, teenagers in the middle of nowhere. Zechariah and Elizabeth, people living on the margins of their community, these are the people that this story starts with, not



Caesar. These little people in the middle of nowhere, when the announcement comes, of the birth of the child, it comes to a bunch of smelly shepherds, right? These are like northern BC tree planters. [laughter] They're just out there doing their thing with their imaginary friends, and just alone! Haven't washed in a while, these are not the people that the most important event in history is supposed to be visited on. It's just not the way you and I would do it. We wouldn't. The place itself, Bethlehem? In Judea?

Ezra and I, Ezra's the campus pastor up in Mission, and he and I were travelling just a few weeks ago. We were involved in some conferences and speaking opportunities back in eastern Canada. We had to go to a conference in Boston and so, we flew into Boston, drove up to Quebec City, which is a beautiful drive. That time of year especially, right? Anyway, we got tired, we had flown overnight, and so we got tired half-way along the way, and we stopped at Tilton, New Hampshire. Have you been to Tilton? Yeah, nobody's been. [Laughter] Of course you haven't been to Tilton. You've never heard of it. "Where's Tilton, New Hampshire?" "I don't know. I don't know where it is. Another dimension, maybe?" [Laughter] We got off the highway. It's just a stop on the side of the road. There's a place called the Tilton Diner, and Ezra and I, right, two western Canadian men, one white, and the other one, not so much. [Laughter] And we walk into the doorway of this diner, we walk in and every eye turns. <squeaking sound as he turns his head> And they stare, not at the white guy, but at the other one. And Ezra went, "Oh boy." [Laughter] We sit, really nice folks, we sit down, but as you're sitting down, everyone's staring at you the whole time, you know? The same people, I'm sure, who've been there for years and years, come to the Tilton Diner all the time. We're sitting across from each other, this lady comes over, "Hey Honey," she said to me, "Sweetheart," Ezra. That's who we were, I was "Honey," he was "Sweetheart" for the rest of the time, right? You can call him Sweetheart when you see him next. [Laughter] I leaned over to him after a while, the food was great, I leaned over to him after a while and I said, "I don't think a whole lot of things happen in Tilton. This might be the biggest thing that's happened in Tilton, for the last while. You're probably going to be in the paper, right?" [Laughter]

Bethlehem is the ancient Tilton. It's just a stop on the side of the road, nothing really big happens there. Yeah, it had a great history, and there were some promises of a Messiah coming from there, but that was hundreds of years ago. Let me show you a map, this is the Roman world. The orange is the Roman empire, the rest is kind of just the barbarian hordes. You can see over on the far right hand side is Judea. It's like, way on the fringe. It's not important, it's way over there, in this most unimportant region is this little town of Bethlehem. And in this little town of Bethlehem, there are these little, unimportant people, who are going to a truck stop. But they can't get a place to stay there, so they have to stay downstairs, and the king of all glory is laid in a feed trough. The one who existed in all time, is next to the cow slop. You see, we wouldn't have done it that way. We just wouldn't have done it that way. If you go there today, if you go to the church of the holy nativity today, in Israel, I can show you a picture, in fact, of the place where they say that Jesus' manger was. This is more like it, right? Marble floors, and gold-plated areas and urns that are gold and silver. Pure gold, burning incense around it. Now *that's* where he should have been born. There was a piece, supposedly, a piece of the manger that was taken from Bethlehem to Italy, and when they did, the Roman Catholic church thought, well we've got to put a little bit more around it than just the wood, so I'll show you a picture, this is what they did. They put the wood inside, it's called the Sacra Culla, and they put the wood inside of there, there's a little window you can look at the wood piece, but the rest of it is like, ornate gold. There's little Jesus in his golden fleece diapers up there, right, he's putting his hands up, the little pope thing. "That's more



like it! That's how you should have done it, God." But he didn't. Why not? Why is the most important person in the history of the world born in such obscure circumstances to such obscure people? Why is it so humble? The answer to the question is in Mary's song. Luke 1:52-53:

"He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."

God uses the humble, not the proud. He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. That's the way he works. There's huge implications to that, you know, and so as we finish here, let me give you two of them. The first implication of it is that humility is required for entrance into God's kingdom. If you want to be right with –if you say to yourself, okay, but how is it that I'm made right with God? The first step, the thing that *you do* is humility. The thing that *you do* is fail. The thing that *you do* is be weak, undeserving, and recognizing it. That's your pass. That's your credential. I use that word "credential" on purpose.

When I was with my wife years ago, in the town of Salzburg, Austria, we were there to take care of my sister in law's son, my sister in law is an opera singer, she was singing in the Salzburg Festspiele, it's a famous opera festival. We got tickets, right, I was sitting in the fourth row with my wife, and behind me was Steve Martin, he was a couple rows behind, I kept saying, "Hey Steve. [Laughter] Sorry, am I in your way, Steve? We could switch, but I guess you're not going to be up here." [Laughter] After the concert, we went out and there was a lineup of people to try to get in the backstage area, right, with their little pads and everybody wants a signature, and to meet people. These days it would be a selfie line. And I had this little placard, this little credential, they called it, to get in. I walked up to the rope, you know, and I held my thing up, and the guy at the thing said, "Everybody move aside." And I walked through them all. [Laughter] I went through the line, and I turned back around, and I thought, this is an amazing thing. This is what a credential gets you. You boast in your credential. It's the thing that grants you access to the inner sanctum. If you were to ask me, "What is that credential that gets you into the inner sanctum with God? What is the thing that is required of you in order to be there?" The answer is weakness. The answer is humility. The answer is failure. You boast in your failure. It's so opposite to the way that we do it. It's part of the reason that you have in Scripture so many admonitions against the accumulation of wealth. Because having money makes you feel like you've got it all sorted. It makes you puff your chest out a little bit and think, well, I've got insurance for all those things. And God's helpful for these little extra bits, but I don't need to rely on him. "You give us this day our daily bread," that's not my situation. You should, according to the Scripture, keep yourself away from the accumulation of wealth, for fear that it might actually rob you of the thing that really matters most. God opposes the proud and he gives grace to the humble. Humility is required for entrance into God's kingdom. That was the first implication.

Here's the second and last implication, though. If that's the case then you and I ought to glory in our weakness, shouldn't we? Instead of our strength? Shouldn't the thing we boast in, shouldn't that thing that we turn around and point to everyone and say, "Look, I'm not good." But that's not how it works in the world. You know if you score a touchdown in football, you stand up and say, "Oh yeah! Check out my name, I'm amazing! Caesar! Caesar! Caesar!" How do you answer questions, how are we taught to answer questions in the interview process? "What's your greatest weakness?" "I work too hard. [Laughter] I'm overly committed to the bosses that I have." [Laughter] Take all of the comments about your weaknesses and turn them into statements about your strengths because you have to glory in your



strength and hide your weakness. And yet Jesus is basically saying, “No, no, no, glory in your weakness. That’s the thing. I use people like that.”

The apostle Paul actually...he talks about this a little bit about himself. He’s got this thing called the “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t really know what it is, probably bad eyesight. And he pleads with God repeatedly, “Can you please take this away from me, I’d be a way better servant of yours, I’d be a better minister of the gospel, if you took bad eyesight away from me.” And he never gets that prayer answered. Why? Well, he talks about it in 2 Corinthians 12. He says,

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

He talks in another place about having this treasure in earthen vessels. It’s like you’ve got a cracked pot and Jesus is on the inside. And the more cracks that are in your pot, the more Jesus shines through. So why are you trying to hide all the cracks? Why am I trying to put my best foot forward all the time? We come to church and say, “Look at me, I’ve got it all sorted. How are you doing? I’m great.” It’s okay to not be okay. Because not being okay got you here. God opposes the proud, he gives grace to the humble. Or as Mary sang it, Luke 1:52-53:

“He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”

Let’s be hungry. Let’s glory in our emptiness. Let me pray for us,

Father, I’m thankful for your grace, I’m thankful for the truth of this passage. Forgive us for so often, Lord, privileging power and success over the little things that you have done with us, and are doing with us. So, God I pray...I’m thankful that as I preach and as the person preaching, I realize, Father, that we don’t have it all together. And we confess that clearly to you, Father. And I pray that we would be the kind of community that would welcome that kind of idea. We love you, we thank you, in Jesus’ name. Amen.