

# Luke 1:26-56

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let me ask you, what sort of people sing loudest at Christmas time? What sort of people sing loudest?! You might not be a Pavarotti. I guess what I'm asking really is, who sings with the loudest heart?

Who has the loudest heart at Christmas? The story goes of a conference in a Presbyterian church in the United States where people at the beginning of a service were given helium balloons. And they were told, release the helium balloon when you know joy in your heart.

I guess they didn't feel comfortable shouting, praise the Lord, hallelujah, that's okay. But during the service, slowly balloons started to ascend around the room. It must have been a great thing. But by the end of the service, a third of the people were still sat there, gripping their balloons tightly. Joy had not surfaced for them yet. Real joy is really hard to get hold of, isn't it? It's really hard to know real joy in the face of ill health, or unemployment, or difficulty.

[ 1 : 27 ] Can you know real joy when you are sad in life? Is there real joy in January, as well as December?

Well, joy is a big theme in the early chapters of Luke. There's lots of joy, isn't there? The joy of the hopeful. So we heard about Anna and Simeon a couple of Sundays ago.

The joy of the heavenly host, as they announce the arrival of this great king. The joy of the hearers of God's announcement. Think of Elizabeth.

And the joy of baby John the Baptist in the womb. He leaps for joy, doesn't he, in verse 44 of our passage.

And then, this morning, we've got Mary's joy. The song of Mary. And in this, we see the joy of the lowly.

[ 2 : 24 ] The joy of the lowly. Only Luke records this song in his gospel. It's unique to him. You wonder why, actually, he puts it here.

You know, if he's wanting to give a narrative of the events, he could have just chopped this out. It doesn't need to be here. If you look at verse 45, you could read straight on from that verse into verse 56, couldn't you?

The narrative wouldn't suffer for that. But it's as if this song is like a showstopper. This is a showstopper where the story is put on hold, just for a few seconds.

Because the response here is joy. It spills out. We have got to sing about this. News. We have got to sing about this. Luke gives an interpretation of what he's saying in these events.

At the birth of Jesus, doesn't he? And for Mary, this is no mere passing interest. This is no mere general pleasure. For Mary, this is the most amazing thing she has ever heard.

[ 3 : 35 ] She is beside herself with joy. Because in Mary, the lowly sing the most loudly.

In Mary, the lowly sing the most loudly. If you look at her song from verse 46, you can see that as a theme, isn't it?

Look at verse 48. The Lord God has looked on the humble estate of his servant. And verse 52, he has exalted those of humble estate.

Verse 51, He's scattered the proud. Do you see the theme here? The lowly sing the most loudly. It's those who know that they have got absolutely nothing who really get Christmas.

She gets it, doesn't she? The balloon of joy rises for Mary. For three reasons. Firstly, God looks on the lowly.

[ 4 : 39 ] God looks on the lowly. I wonder who you would choose to bear the Son of God. The incarnate Son of God.

Before she became probably the most famous woman in the world. We've got to wonder, who on earth was Mary anyway? Who was she? We don't know much about her, do we?

She was a young girl. She lived in a little village in the north. With the country bumpkins up north. In Galilee. And there was a huge difference between people who lived in Galilee up north and the people who lived in Judah where Elizabeth was.

For example. One historian says that a Galilean down south was like having a Texan in New York. I don't know if that means anything to you. They were the outsiders.

They were the cowboys. They didn't belong here. They were not one of us. Separated by the land of the Samaritans.

[ 5 : 43 ] And here is this girl. Women would have been looked down on in society in Luke's day. And so she's the last one you'd pick, isn't she? To start getting a religion going.

If you want to sort of make up a religion. It would have been ridiculous, wasn't it? It's one of the reasons why this story cannot be made up. An unexpected pregnancy in a Jewish family would have been buried deep in the family closet, wouldn't it?

Start a new religion. Get famous. Well, I'll make up a story about an angel visiting me. And getting pregnant when I'm a virgin. As a teenager.

It's just ridiculous, isn't it? No one would believe it. You couldn't make it up. If it wasn't true. She's such an obscure figure.

She is young. She's feeble. She's insignificant. A village girl. She is lowly. And yet, verse 48. Look how she starts her song.

[ 6 : 48 ] My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. God has looked upon me.

God has picked me out. Why me? She thinks. She finds the favour of God. Or rather, the favour of God finds her. God favours the lowly.

And for God to look at her, that is not just like looking through one-way glass, is it? It is an active thing that God is doing. He is not just observing, but he wants to get involved with this girl's life.

He directs his energy towards her. To bless her. To love her. To show himself to her. To bless the kind of people who have got nothing to give him in return.

He loves to help the lowly. The undeserving. God does not bless us because we have got anything to give him. All we bring is our poverty and our guilt.

[ 7 : 59 ] I wonder if you believe that this morning. You have nothing to give to God. You have nothing to give him. So to sing like Mary with a full heart is to sing with empty hands.

Because if you know you have got nothing to give God. Well actually this is your happy Christmas, isn't it? Mary tells us actually you have got everything to rejoice about.

If you know you have got nothing. Because God looks on the lowly. He comes to seek the lost. He wants the guilty. He wants the shamed.

He wants the wretched. He wants the dirty. He wants those who are scandalised by the world. So this is paradoxical Christian joy, isn't it?

It is joy in our emptiness. And in our lack. In the lack of our lives. When we know we've got nothing to give God.

[ 9 : 02 ] He looks on the lowly. And God is active in humanity. When we don't expect it. When we don't deserve it. He comes uninvited to us.

When we least deserve it. When we least reckon he will. To the people who don't expect him. To the little people. To the lowly people.

God looks on the lowly. Secondly though. Mary rejoices because God is saviour to the lowly. God is saviour to the lowly.

It's worth thinking about why Mary is so happy here. Isn't it? What is it that Mary is rejoicing about? She's got news of this baby coming.

When you think about the difference between Mary and Elizabeth. Whose home she has just visited. Who is also expecting. There is a similarity.

[ 10 : 00 ] They're both impossible pregnancies aren't they? Elizabeth is barren. Mary is a virgin. It's a work of the Holy Spirit. But I don't think Mary's concern is having a family.

I don't think that's what it is. She's unmarried. She's probably about 13 or 14. She is not worried at this stage of life. I don't think about barrenness.

That is not on the agenda. Luke doesn't mention that anywhere. The baby though is good news. Not because she wants to be a mother. Maybe that's more the case for Elizabeth.

Now Mary pinpoints the heart issue of this. She rejoices because the baby says to her. Verse 47. She rejoices in God my saviour.

God my saviour. She understands who this baby will be doesn't she? She understands that this child whose name Jesus.

[11:06] It means saviour. It means deliverer. This baby as Gabriel tells her will be king and messiah. The son of the most high. And he will save.

The child that she will wean. The baby that she will cuddle. The baby that grows up in the home will one day save her.

He will save her when she cannot save herself. And so what this means is that actually before Christmas becomes a delight. Before it becomes a joy to us.

Christmas must first be an indictment upon us. An indictment. It tells us that we need a saviour. The fire crew are at the door.

And they are breaking in because we need rescuing. The house is full of smoke. And so the baby coming. The saviour coming. Is a siren call.

[12:05] That we are in deep deep danger. And Mary knows that. He is her delight. Because she knows her need for him as saviour.

The fire crew. When it comes outside the house. It tells me I am being saved. Yes. But it also tells me. The house is going down.

And I have got to get out. That I am in massive, massive danger. And I need a saviour. As a Jewish girl.

She has grown up in the family. She has learnt. Hasn't she? The Bible. She has learnt. The family history. She knows how the relationship between God.

And the people is going. And it is fractured. It is not good. There is a rift between humanity. And God.

[13:02] They are back in the land of Israel. Aren't they? From exile. But it is far from ideal. The promises of all of the prophets in the Old Testament. For a king.

To bring righteousness and justice. To unite the people in purity. The prospect of God's presence with them. Brought together.

Are things that the prophets have been pointing to. But it has been so long. And the dream has been consigned to history. For some.

They have lost hope. Centuries have gone by it. There has just been darkness. Just a thick black wall of silence. I wonder if you ever feel like that. If you ever pray.

And you just feel like your prayers are just hitting a glass ceiling. There is something in the way. There is bad feeling. Between you and your God. Bonhoeffer.

[14:00] Advent is like being in a prison cell. One waits. Hopes and does this. That or the other. Things that are of really no consequence. Because the door is shut.

And the only way. It can be opened. Is from the outside. And the child coming. For Mary. Is God. Jangling the keys. Outside the door. That God is entering and breaking in. To save. The fire crew is at the door. You know.

We have got to get around this. Sentimental view of Mary. Hasn't. Haven't we. We have to honour her. And think of how God has blessed her. But she didn't have a halo. Did she.

She was a sinner. She was in grave. Grave danger. Under the slavery. Of her own guilt. Waiting for a rescuer. As one preacher famously put it.

[14:57] If her greatest need was for information. God would have sent an educator. If it was for technology. God would have sent a scientist. If it was for pleasure.

God would have sent an entertainer. If it was for money. He would have sent an economist. But since her greatest need was for forgiveness. God sends a saviour.

And the only reason why God saves her. Is because when left to herself. She is absolutely lost. And if he doesn't do it.

No one will. No one can. And that is what lowliness is about. It is being helpless. It is being defenseless.

It is being in a prison. Where we cannot rescue ourselves. There is an idea going around. That God is quite harsh.

[15:55] That God is unfair. To ask human beings. To pay something to him. That they cannot pay. To demand from us. What we cannot pay.

Have you heard of that? So people say. Don't they. How can you talk about a God. Who punishes sin. When everyone knows. That no one is perfect.

It is unfair. For God to demand. A life of. Perfection. When no one is able. To do that. No one is able.

To live that life. But if you think about. The logic of that. That does not work. That is like me saying. To the bank. Isn't it. After taking out. A ten thousand pound loan.

Me turning up. And saying. You know. I can't pay off the loan. Because I've spent all of my money. And then expecting them. To say. Well if you don't have it. You don't have to pay it off. Our responsibility.

[16:52] To give God. What he deserves. Is not cancelled out. By our inability. To give it. That is not. God's fault. That is our fault.

Because we've willingly. Turned from him. We've done that. Not him. And so we are in a prison. We're in a prison. Made for ourselves.

So you can try this. Or that. One thing or another. You can try. A bit of religion. You can try. Living a good life. But really. It's of no consequence.

Because the problem is. The door is shut. And it can only be open. From the outside. We cannot please. God alone. We are in debt. To him. And there is no way.

To pay him back. And admitting that. Is true lowliness. It is not a superficial. That's humility. It's all of us.

[17:50] Isn't it. If we will admit that. Today. Before God. It is saying to you God. I have got nothing. So it will be a delight.

For you. It will be a true. Moment of rejoicing. When you realise. That Christmas. Is first. An indictment. Upon you. Tells you that. You need a saviour.

Mary rejoices. As God looks on the lowly. The saviour to the lowly. But how does he do it? Thirdly. How does he do this? Rescue. God exalts the lowly.

What does the salvation. Actually look like? Well if you look at her song. It looks like. A war. Actually.

Mary is singing. A battle song here. It pictures God. As a warrior. Who appears in battle. To rescue his people.

[18:46] I forget some of the language she uses. Verse 49. He is mighty. Verse 51. He's shown strength. With his arm. Verse 52. He's brought down the mighty.

From their thrones. This is the picture of a king. A righteous warrior king. Who is defeating his enemies. He helps his servant Israel.

Verse 54. God saves. God rescues. By winning a war. He gets into battle. The language is quite violent.

Isn't it? It's quite aggressive. He scatters. He throws mighty kings down. It's fighting talk. Christmas is God engaging in a war.

But it's not a war on terror. It's not a political war. It's not a war on global warming. It's not the war of an oppressive tyrant.

[19:47] But it is a war on God's greatest enemy. It is a war on pride. Do you see the war that he wages?

He scatters the proud. In the thoughts of their hearts. He brings down the mighty. He sends the rich away.

He exalts the humble. It is a war that violently disturbs the whole world system. It is a world shaking war.

It is a war that changes the numbers on the podium of life. Where the proud are brought down and the lowly are raised.

And he does it in the most unexpected fashion. Because he himself. The king of glory. Will bend the rules. Of the world.

[20:48] He will bend himself. To this new world order. To his new world order. As the exalted eternal almighty God.

The son of God. He will turn himself upside down. He will plummet. To the dust of the earth. The greatest power that the universe has ever seen.

Will contract himself down to the very epitome of weakness. And he comes down to lift his people up. As the Christian writer Ambrose said.

In the sobs of that appalling infancy. He was on the earth. So that you might be in the stars. He came to the inn.

That you might live in heaven. He became poor. That you might become rich. Wrapped in swaddle. That you might be robed in his righteousness.

[ 21 : 56 ] He is the ultimate freedom fighter. And he wages his war on pride. He comes like a warrior. But he comes silently. Doesn't he? Unexpectedly.

Not with fanfares from above. Not with scenes of glory. But a humble gift of love. Jesus born of Mary as we sung. Isaiah speaks of the Lord's servant in Isaiah 49.

In the shadow of his hand. He hid me away. Like a polished arrow. In his quiver. He hid me away. And the polished arrow strikes human pride. Hidden away. By choosing to appear to a little girl. In a country village. To reduce himself to the womb of a girl. With weapons of humility and weakness. Thomas Merton.

[ 22 : 58 ] A writer. A Christian writer. Wrote in his book. Raids on the unspeakable. He says this. Into this world. In which there is absolutely no room for him at all.

Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it. Because he is out of place in it. And yet must be in it.

His place is with those for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong. His war is to make his home with the lowly people.

With the sinners. With the sick. With the lame. With the blind. With babies. This is his war. To come and seek and save the lost.

Christ. So if you think that you can pay God this morning. If you think that you can earn. His favour this morning.

[ 24 : 01 ] If you've got something to give to God. This child has come. And war is upon you. This saviour is not for you.

He is against you. Because God looks on the lowly. He saves the lowly. He exalts the lowly. He makes his home with the lowly. We've got to stop pretending that we have got anything to give to God.

It's funny how in the detail of Mary meeting Elizabeth. Just in a few moments before her song. A young girl goes to visit an older relative.

In Judah. And the etiquette of that meeting has been switched around. I don't know if you've noticed this. Normally you'd have expected Mary to pay homage to her older relative Elizabeth.

Wouldn't you? Mary would be thanking her for the privilege. But you see how it's been turned on its head here. It's not Mary who pays homage.

[ 25 : 05 ] But verse 43. Elizabeth says. Why is this granted to me? That the mother of my Lord should come to me. Who am I that you Mary should be here?

That I should be allowed to be in your presence Mary? It turns everything upside down doesn't it? Do you see? As the Saviour comes down.

The girl is raised up. God humbles himself. And the girl is honoured. And this salvation comes as God subverts.

He turns the world's values upside down. And the greater serves the lesser. The lowly are exalted. And this little girl.

Has now become the most iconic woman ever to have lived. We're talking about her today aren't we? 2,000 years on. And this is the grace of God.

[ 26 : 08 ] The staggering grace. That God doesn't merely save us. From our sin. But he exalts us. He raises his people up. And even though our salvation and our forgiveness is entirely from him.

This gift of a child is nothing to do with Mary in a sense. Has it? And yet he honours her. He honours us for the gifts he himself has given to us.

The things that the Lord has given to us. He counts as our own. And rewards us for them. He honours us. For his own gifts. It's crazy isn't it?

It's almost nonsensical. It is ridiculous kindness. But this is his world order. Where the lowly are raised up.

And the proud are brought low. Because he himself has bent himself. Later in Luke's Gospel. Jesus says to his disciples in Luke 22.

[ 27 : 13 ] I am among you. I am among you. As the one who serves. I am among you as the one who serves. The king's people are lifted up.

Because the king himself comes down to serve. And to make himself nothing. And to become a slave. And to die a slave's death.

On a cross for his people. It's great how Mary realises that all of this is not actually about her. Is it? It's great the way Mary puts her own experience in context. If you look at the last couple of verses of her song. She puts it in context of God's people.

Doesn't she? Of God helping his servant Israel. Of remembering his promises to Abraham. It's as if she's saying.

[ 28 : 11 ] Do you know in all of this. I'm in a way. I'm no special case. She's saying. All of this is amazing. But really. We should have expected this.

God has done this before. And God is doing it now. And God will do it. This is what God does. This is our God. The God of Abraham. There is a sense where the virgin birth. Is another day at the office for God.

The most supernatural miracle that we've ever seen. Is God at his most natural. This is what God does.

This is our generous God. This is the God of grace. The God of the lowly. The servant God.

[ 29 : 07 ] And so if you have got nothing. With God this morning. If you know that you have got empty hands with him. You have got every reason to rejoice.

You have got every reason to sing with a loud heart. Do you know joy is not the feeling you get with a stand up comedian is it.

Michael McIntyre will not give you joy this Christmas. You can be laughing your head off can't you. And you can be empty. Inside. You can be empty of joy.

You could own everything you want in this world. And you could be totally joyless. And you might still be holding on to your balloon this morning.

Because you are secretly thinking to yourself. Do you know what God I will pay you. I will do this. I will make this right.

[ 30 : 04 ] I'll do it. But this is why Mary sings loudest. The Magnificat. It's called isn't it. That is from the Latin. To magnify. It is about what God has done.

Not what Mary can do. Or what I can do. This is paradoxical Christian joy. It is joy in our emptiness. And our lowliness.

Before God. It is joy in knowing that we've got nothing. It is joy in empty hands. Because this is our God.

So let go of the balloon. Magnify and rejoice in him. Because the lowly sing the loudest. Let's pray together.