

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “A Fragile Gift”

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Luke 1:39-55

*39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,  
40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth  
heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the  
Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and  
blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother  
of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child  
in my womb leapt for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a  
fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'*

*46 And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
50 His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

I recall watching a news report a few years ago, in which a reporter went to a local mall to interview shoppers in the midst of their last minute crusade to purchase just the right gift at a bargain price. I was prepared for the usual babble and questions about what they were buying and why they waited so long to do their shopping. But these shoppers weren't asked about that. Instead the reporter asked them to name the gifts that they themselves had received the previous Christmas. It was fascinating to see their reactions. Hardly anyone could recall anything that they had received for Christmas about 360 days earlier.

It seems the only person who could accurately recall his previous Christmas present was a gentleman whose wife had purchased him a home brewing kit, from

which he could make his own beer. The man remembered it not because he enjoyed the brewing kit, but because after receiving the gift, he had to go out and buy a bunch of bottles and buckets and yeast to make it work. He said the brewing beer stunk up the house so badly and tasted so horribly that his wife finally asked him to throw the entire mess away. It was a disaster! And that is why he remembered it.

The point that the report was trying to make was that much of what we scatter and scurry about doing in the days before Christmas is really wasted time and energy. We tend to forget the specific gifts we receive even as we always remember the goodness of the giver.

I also saw online this week a listing of presents one should not buy a loved one for Christmas. Beside fruitcakes and Chia pets and gift cards (I kind of like gift cards!), the list included pets-like a new puppy or kitten. It seems that when you give a pet for Christmas you are passing on a responsibility to someone who may not be prepared to accept it. Getting a dog is a decision to be made by the owner. After our beloved dog Emma died in April, Laura and I waited around five months before adopting our new dog Garbo. As much as we love dogs, we did not realize how free we were from obligation those five months. Pets require preparation and attention: they need to be let outside late at night and early in the morning; they need to be fed and given water; they need exercise and play; they chew things up, sometimes valuable things; they require medical attention; they tend to mess up the house. Pets are a gift, but a gift that makes life more complicated.

On the fourth Sunday in Advent, the Scripture lesson is the gospel of Luke's wonderful story about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary, having been visited by the angel Gabriel, is aware that she is pregnant with a special child, one to be called the Son of God. The circumstances surrounding the scene are extraordinary. She is a very young woman. She is not married. She is told of her condition by an angel who represents God. She has to accept her part in the plan of God with little more than faith. In a sermon Barbara Brown Taylor describes Mary's situation wonderfully saying, "She does not have a sonogram, or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that say 'the child really is mine.'" She is receiving a gift which she did not request and for which she is not prepared.

Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. Scripture says that Mary spent three months there. Evidently she had some kind of bond with Elizabeth, something that would support her during the difficult time that she was experiencing. Elizabeth's story of "being with child" is quite different from Mary's however. Elizabeth is in what is called "old age," certainly older than most women who bear children. Thought to be unable to have a child, Elizabeth is now thrilled at this gift of God which she carries inside of her. Luke's words describe the meeting of these two women. Both are expectant with child. Both women are instruments in the plan of God. Both woman are about to have their worlds changed completely by the circumstances of their condition.

Whenever I encounter an expectant first-time parent, I am prone to offer the obvious advice, "Your world is about to change forever." That's an understatement! When I first began to minister in Salt Lake City, my secretary was a young newlywed, without children. She always made fun of my car. It wasn't a cool car- it was either a station wagon or mini-van. After all, I had to transport children! And it was always dirty, filled with empty straw wrappers, French fries, Happy meal toys, and crayons. Who had time to clean? Her car of course was a red sports car, always freshly washed, waxed, and spotless. Little did she know the truth of life! When I left Salt Lake she had two

children. She still hadn't purchased a mini-van but her car was as dirty as mine ever was. The gift of children changes your life even more than a puppy!

In Mary's case the change in her life was even more dramatic. Her once normal life turned so abnormally uncertain. Everything stable was now at risk. The world would see her son as illegitimate, born into embarrassment. Her promised husband could choose to leave her or have her publicly denounced. And the angel of God told her that his baby would change the world. The mighty would fall and the humble would rise. Those in power would constantly feel threatened by the reality of God in him. It is no wonder that Mary was troubled by this gift of God presented to her. The child she was carrying was not something expected that would make her life easier. It was a fragile gift that would produce more uncertainty and greater challenge.

But with the wisdom and example of Elizabeth, Mary quickly comes to see this fragile gift as a blessing. While we may prefer magnificent presents which will make life easier, make us look better, or allow us to feel better- the gift of God as it came to Mary first made things more difficult. It wasn't something grand and glorious. It was troubling and complicated. Mary could have focused on plight of her situation. She could have complained of the burden she had to bear and the trial she was about to endure. But instead she chose to see blessing, or at least the potential for blessing. She accepted this fragile gift with faith, recognizing not the complication but the grace. She accepted the gift of bearing God's Son with joy, not because she was thrilled with the circumstances but because she understood and trusted in the love of the giver of the gift.

Herbert O'Driscoll writes of a childhood trip to his grandfather's farm in County Kilkenny, Ireland. On the farm was a hired hand named John Brennan. In the evening, after the chores were done, John would sit on a large stone outside the barn, smoke his pipe, and tell stories. One night he asked his listeners to look at the sun which was setting, and upon the moon which was appearing almost ghost-like, and the stars which were poking their light through the advancing darkness. "Do you know," he asked, "that the stars and sun and moon move around all the time? Do you know how the angel Gabriel came to Mary the mother of our Lord to tell her she would have a child? Well, do you know that when the angel asked Mary if she would bear the holy child, all the stars and the sun and the moon stopped moving until she gave Gabriel her reply? And when she said yes, they all began to move again. Did you know that?"

In his book *Peculiar Treasures*, Frederick Buechner writes of the moment. "Gabriel told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl."

And so the gift of God came into the world as challenge, as mystery, as uncertainty to be embraced by faith. And seen through faith that fragile gift become promise and possibility and light in the darkness.

And so the gift of God is prepared to be born into our world, our lives, and our hearts this Christmas. Ideas will be born in our minds. Love will be created in our hearts. Possibilities will be raised in our soul. It is a fragile gift that we must accept with trust, nurture with commitment and share with others as a blessing. It may not be something we had on our list. But the heavens will be waiting to see how we accept it.