

# Longing for Revolution

Luke 1:38-80

Grace Church Waco | 12.13.20

Let me remind you again that Advent is a time of longing. I want to begin our time in the text this morning with this reminder because generally speaking, we are poor longers. If we are poor longers it is because we lack the understanding to know how poor we are. Jesus calls this of course, being “poor in Spirit”. And the reason it’s so hard for us to be poor in Spirit is because there are few times where we find ourselves to be poor in body. Even in a pandemic, our needs are met. Many of us are professionals, we have the luxury of working from home, of the comfort of a savings account. In our congregation itself we have a shocking amount of graduate degrees and well educated members. What is there, after all, to long for?

Godward longing, after all, is more of an art than a science. It’s a posture of the heart, not a formula of the circumstance. But our circumstances get in the way, don’t they? And it’s no wonder that there are times when God determines by any way possible to shake the comfort of his people back into the alertness of longing. Longing means we have a palpable hope, a hope we can taste. It means we really believe the kingdom of God is near enough to touch, otherwise our emotions would have given up longing and desiring long ago.

The methodist Charles Wesley, no stranger to the art of longing, puts it like this in one of his hymns:

Come, Desire of nations, come!  
Mindful of thy chosen race,  
Shorten these vindictive days;  
Hear us now, and save thine own.  
We for full redemption groan;

Do you for full redemption moan? Does your desire for the things of God, the kingdom of God, the Spirit of God, keep you up at night sometimes? For all the things we get right in our evangelical, gospel-focused tradition, here is something we often forget: from the ancient church to the reformation to the Great Awakening, our roots are in *revival*. We are grounded in the fact that Christianity is not a religion of duty but a religion of desire.

What ultimately, is the longing of Christianity for? What is the desire of the nations? Well, our text this morning shows us. Christmas shows us. The heart of Christian longing is grounded in what we may call *revolution*. Now you might have negative connotations of this word, and rightfully so.



What I am not saying is that Christmas is about a violent cease of power or some sort of redistribution of wealth or class. But, it is hard to ignore **1:52** isn't it?

What we will see today is that the longing of Advent, the desire of every man or woman who longs to please God, is a desire for God to come and shake things up. It's a desire for something new: a new kingdom, a new king, new loves and new ways and new societies. What we long for at Christmas is the surety of what we long for when Christ comes again: for the revolution of God's kingdom to be complete. Until you not only understand that but long for it, you will never understand Advent.

Our text shows us three characters, the same from last week: Elizabeth, Mary, and Zechariah. All of them are longing and desiring, but today they begin to hope against hope. They begin to believe that God's revolution may actually, finally, be here. Their hope is our hope too. So let's consider three revolutions of Christmas:

1. The Barren Give Blessing (39-45)
2. The Lowly Are Lifted (46-56)
3. The Failures Get A Voice (57-80)

## **The Barren Give Blessing (39-45)**

Our text begins in **verse 39-40** picking up where Mary's story ended. It says immediately after receiving this visit from Gabriel, she went with haste to visit Elizabeth. Put yourself in her shoes if you can. She is a poor nobody from a nobody town. Nazareth is not mentioned once in the Old Testament, nor in the Talmud or the works of the wish historian Josephus. It's not important enough to mention. Yet this young woman, a teenager, is chosen by God. She receives an angelic revelation, which she submits herself to. There is no strong reasoning to believe she is running from her situation in Nazareth, but rather we are led by the text to assume she goes to Elizabeth because of the respect she has for her. Remember Gabriel told her also of Elizabeth, her relative, who has with child. Mary goes to her because needs counsel and a place to rest after this news. Surely Elizabeth, who has also recently received a miracle, would understand.

The road to Judah would have been long, at least 3 days, and not safe for Mary. It was not permissible for a betrothed woman her age to travel outside of her own town. She probably had to dodge Roman guards. Remember her nation is an occupied one, she feels the weight and desire of political freedom. Mary risks so much to travel to see her relatives. You can imagine the state of her heart as she makes the trek. She has had time to this point to begin to hope against hope, to consider the words of Gabriel, to ask herself the question: "could it really be true? That God's messiah would be born through me, a virgin?" She has also had time to doubt the promises of God. Surely she has heard the voice of the enemy in her ear, echoing the same refrain he has since the garden: "did God really say? Did God really mean *you* would be the mother of the Christ?"



So it is faithful but conflicted Mary, who escapes to the home of Elizabeth. But remember, Elizabeth may be more mature and wise in the ways of God, but she has also had her troubles. Barren for years and years, longing and waiting. Even though now she has the joy of being pregnant, that kind of waiting can bring bitterness. Will she welcome Mary, who comes with news of her pregnancy that she didn't even have to ask or long for like Elizabeth did? Not to mention the fact that when Elizabeth hears Mary's story, it's a clear one-up on hers. God miraculously provides a son for barren Elizabeth, but a virgin birth? Needless to say it wouldn't be surprising if that upset Elizabeth's pride.

But God is doing something here. Christmas is bringing in *revolution*. Not only does Elizabeth the barren receive the blessing of a child, she becomes the instrument of God for blessing Mary. This comes, as our text says in **verse 41**, by the Holy Spirit. As soon as she hears Mary's voice, John the Baptist inside of her, who remember our text said was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, leaps for joy. Already this baby is preparing way for Christ, even before his birth. What a beautiful picture of the sanctity of life in the womb. What does the Spirit of God prompt Elizabeth to do? **Verse 42-45**, to give a blessing to Mary. The barren becomes the blessing.

While of course it is possible that in Mary's greeting she told Elizabeth about her baby, our text intentionally points us to assume that Elizabeth only knows this fact by the filling of the Holy Spirit and the prophet inside of her. Why does she call Mary blessed? There is no envy in her heart towards Mary, because God reveals to her that even though John is a miracle prophet, the baby in Mary is LORD. When we receive blessing from the Lord of any kind, it should always point us like Elizabeth to the greater blessing: Jesus Christ the Lord.

In **Verse 45** Elizabeth also blesses Mary for her belief. This is just what Mary needs, isn't it? God is providing for her through the words of the previously barren. This affirmation is telling Mary: keep going. Don't doubt. The fulfillment of what was promised to you is coming. The theme here of certainty and fulfillment is all over Luke. This is because Luke writes his gospel to Theophilus, we find his purpose in **1:4**: certainty. By the affirmation of Elizabeth, Mary is growing in certainty.

What do we take from all this? At least this revolutionary idea: God wants to use the most barren parts of your life to bring his kingdom. We found something similar in the story of Hannah, didn't we? Neither her nor Elizabeth's barrenness was pointless. They had to have faith, but it was all being used by God. So the most barren situations you find yourself in are not pointless or hopeless. Jesus Christ came into the world and became barren: cut off from the Father, childless and friendless and forsaken at the cross. But his barrenness was the means to your eternal blessing; this is the revolution of the gospel.

Advent means we are waiting and longing for the barrenness we see now to bring fruit in its season. And when it comes, we will say with Elizabeth in **verse 43**: "why is this granted to me that my Lord should come to me?" At the end of this earth, we will stand in awe at God's plans and consider ourselves blessed to be a small part. Have faith now when you can only see tomorrow.



## The Lowly Are Lifted (46-56)

The encouragement of Elizabeth is immediately effective for Mary. Whether her song is sung spontaneously and then remembered or written down later as a reflection, we get a peek into her inner thought process. This psalm is typically called the Magnificat, since that is the first word in latin from the greek: magnify. "Magnify my soul, the Lord" literally reads the greek in **verse 46**. That structure is significant, showing the emphasis here is not on Mary or her situation or her emotions, rather it is on God. This is a song of praise, even while she still sits in a seat of uncertainty. Any fear and doubt she has, at least in this moment, is given over to praise.

And in **verse 47** we find where her praise comes from: from her spirit. This is different from soul in verse 46. Soul is psyche, her lifeblood, but spirit is deeper, it is pneuma, her breath. Mary not only utters praise from her physical depths, but from her essence. This is a full-bodied, total act of worship. Why? **Verse 48** sums it up. God has *looked*.

What gospel news Christmas brings, because it tells us that in our humble, weak, worthless, pitiful, sorry, wayward state, God looks. He regards us, notices us. This is the truth that Mary is beginning to wrestle with and believe. Only God is kind and merciful enough to notice the weakest of all of us. This is the revolution of Christmas. You may feel so unnoticed today, so beaten down, so looked over. And perhaps rightfully so: there isn't much impressive about you. Perhaps you act out or socialize online or wear an extra layer of makeup or an extra level of charm just to stick out a bit, just so someone, anyone sees. This is Mary's life: she is so young and poor and small, and no one has ever really cared about her. But how could she not praise with all her soul when she realizes the God of the universe has seen her, has called her blessed? Now all generations to come will notice her, why? Not because she was powerful or particularly beautiful or born into the right family. Because God chose her. Dear overlooked brother and sister, if you are in Christ then GOD has chosen you too. He sees. All generations for eternity will call you blessed enough to be one with the Son, just as Mary was. Revolutionary, isn't it?

This is the mind bending of Christmas, **verse 49: for he who is mighty has done great things for ME**, normal, unremarkable me. **Verse 50**, his mercy isn't for those who are powerful and mighty themselves, for those who others fear and respect. No, his mercy is for those, no matter their status and no matter their inability to not be a complete idiot, fear HIM. No matter the generation, says the text, the pathway to blessedness has always been being low before a holy God.

This song of Mary is a political hymn, isn't it? This is the revolution she is reveling in, in **verses 51-53**. No longer is this just personal, it's for all people, anyone who would hear. In order for the lowly to be lifted, the mighty must be deflated. This is the way Christmas works, this is the gospel that when we believe it elicits from our hearts nothing but praise: all who strut their stuff before God get sent away eternally empty, but all those who realize their need enter into a never-ending banquet of blessing.



All of this, Mary realizes is not new. 54-55 remind us she is an Israelite after all. The stories she is told as a child are true, she now sees. God has not forgotten his people, because he is not a God who forgets. In this humble woman's song we are led to trust God's character as she does. God is a God who lifts the lowly.

This is the gospel of Christmas, and it's what we wait for in Advent. Mary still waits for Jesus to be born, and she must wait longer for salvation to come, and even longer for eternity. But her waiting and longing is filled with joyful song. There is reason to hope in your lowliness, friends. Jesus Christ himself was not impressive to look at. Even after he raised the dead, people overlooked him. He was born through lowly means and died a lowly death. But this is the revolution of the gospel: on the third day the lowly got lifted, all the way out of the tomb. And he promises to take you with him, out of the depths of death and into the heights of resurrection. While you wait, you may feel underappreciated and undervalued in this world. But God sees, and the surest way to glory is by forsaking the fading riches and applause of the world for the smile of God that lasts forever.

## **The Failures Get a Voice (57-80)**

I told you Christmas was good. Let's move on to our last picture of revolution. We find it in our last character, Zechariah. Remember him, he is the one who doubted God and immediately lost his voice. He is pretty much a failure. He waits for his whole life for God to answer his prayer, and when he finally does, he doesn't believe him. But his punishment by God shakes him up a bit. He gets tougher, and he is determined this time to get things right.

So Elizabeth gives birth, and when the time comes to circumcise the little boy and name him, just a few days after birth, here is a chance for Zechariah to get a little credit. His relatives want to name the boy Zechariah Jr! After all, he is a well-respected priest, the boy should be honored to receive his Father's name. Fortunately, the naming privileges go solely to the parents. Notice Elizabeth speaks up: she says that should be called John. I think it is clear Zechariah has been using his writing pad a lot, because he must've had some way to convince Elizabeth the significance of this. He does not want to doubt again: the boy should be John, just as God commanded through Gabriel. All of this is reinforced when they bring the tablet to him again and he makes no qualms. Elizabeth says: "he shall be called John", but Zechariah goes straight to the point: "his name is John". End of story.

The significance of this naming story, and why Luke chooses to include it, is because this is the turning point for Zechariah. As soon as he writes down John's name, his voice returns. This shows us Zechariah's faith had taken a turn. To name him John isn't just a stylistic preference, it is a submission to John's future destiny. Zechariah has accepted that his son will be the forerunner of the Messiah. He doesn't belong to Zechariah, he belongs to God. The first words out of his mouth? A blessing, a praise to God. I can imagine the tears in his eyes. This old man, now a father of a miracle son. No wonder the whole county wonders at this birth. It's a birth that is preparing the way for the wonder of the world.



What happens next to Zechariah is only the mercy of God. For months he uttered no sound, and suddenly he is filled with the Spirit and utters a prophecy, the words of God. His prophecy has two parts: first, outlining the purpose of the Messiah, and second, the purpose of John the baptist. His song is often called the Benedictus, again because of the latin translation of the first greek word. In English it reads *Blessed*. This is a blessing given to God.

Notice a few points with me. Just a few months ago, Zechariah doubted God could give him a son, much less that God would bring Messiah. Now look at his confidence by the Spirit: he puts the salvation of God in a past tense. He *has* visited and redeemed his people. No longer is there any doubt. I love this too: Zechariah's song does not say that God will simply send a messenger, or send someone else to visit and redeem. No, Christmas is Emmanuel: God himself come to visit and to redeem. This Messiah will be God in the flesh.

The way God will visit and redeem is through his servant, the horn of salvation, from the house of David. A horn in this context is not an instrument but the horn of an animal, like a weapon. What is in view here? Let's look at one of the few times this language is used in Scripture, in Psalm 18:2,

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Here is the identity of Jesus shown through Zechariah: fortress, stronghold, shield, refuge, rock, the very means of my salvation. He is the horn because he uses his strength over his enemies to make his people secure. This is the promise of Christmas. This is the mercy shown to God's people. Promised to Abraham, upheld in God's covenant, **verse 74-75**, that being delivered you are so secure that instead of doubting God, you can serve him with holiness and righteousness for all your days.

Friends, Zechariah served God as a priest. But he was not always holy or righteous. Why? Because he had not yet been saved from his enemies. And whether he knows it or not, his greatest enemy is himself. But here is the promise: there is a salvation coming that will make him secure. It will make his obedience and his righteousness and holiness forever secure. What is this salvation? It is Christmas, the great securing. It's the advent of Christ, the one who takes failures like Zechariah and like you and like me and wraps us up in himself, the stronghold of all strongholds.

I love this picture. Zechariah, mute because of his lack of faith, by the grace of God finds his voice. And who does he speak of? Not first of his son, but of Christ, the one who he was really waiting for all along. God takes failures and supernaturally by the Spirit makes them into men and women who with crystal clarity can proclaim the excellencies of Christ. So if that's you, you feel a failure, here is great news. Christmas is a time to find your voice. Because God has visited, and given you something to sing about.



## Come, Desire of Nations, Shine

“Come, Desire of nations, come!” is what Wesley penned. And it’s our longing now. And God bless Zechariah, he puts it just so. When he changes his song from speaking of Christ to speaking to John, he still speaks of Christ. And how does he speak of him? **Verse 78-79**. He is the sunrise.

You probably know that some parts of the world experience complete daytime at certain times of the year. The sun never sets. BUT did you know a few select parts of the world have days where there is just complete darkness? Parts of Norway, for example, there is no visible sun for days. And I imagine going there on those days or weeks with constant darkness, that is like advent. Waiting, waiting, and waiting for the sunrise that never seems to come.

Some of us today are honorary Norweigeings, sitting in the polar night of the soul. We are barren, we are lowly, we are failures. All around feels dark. But imagine those men and women in the darkest parts of the earth, how they feel when the sunrise finally comes? All of a sudden, everything is seen again. Beauty is tangible again, hope is visible. No longer do they need some artificial light to guide them, now their steps are peace as the sun shines.

So it is with us, Church. Christ has come into the world, eternal sunrise. His paths are visible, and they are full of peace. He makes the barren into bringers of blessing, he lifts the lowly to unprecedented heights, and he gives a voice of salvation to the failures. This is the joy of Christmas. And all of it only found because Jesus Christ is the light of the world who has broken into our night. Here is why we light the candles, here is why we sing, here is why we have hope even in our longing. The son of God risen onto the world, and although it may seem like it is dark now, he has made sure by his bloody cross and his empty tomb that his light will never be extinguished. And one day friends, we will see that light brightly again. What a revolution the gospel is. Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. Come quickly, Lord.

