

Advent: Rejoicing in the God of Reversal

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Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. It's good to be here with you this morning. As Tommy said, my name's Jeff, and I've been going to Church of the Advent for a little over a year. And this church, this church family, has become a place where I have grown a lot of deep affection and love.

And it's just good to, it's such an honor and a privilege to bring God's Word this morning. Um, as, as Tommy said earlier, we are in the third Sunday of the season of Advent, um, which is a season in the Christian calendar, which is a season of waiting and anticipation.

Uh, it's a season where we reflect on the people of Israel and how for 400 years they were waiting for God to fulfill his promises, uh, to bring a Savior, to bring a Deliverer and a Messiah.

And as we reflect on, uh, the life and the story of Israel, we're reminded, uh, that we are also a people who wait. Uh, some of us are waiting in our vocations. Uh, we're waiting to finish a degree program or we're waiting to, uh, to find a new job or a different job.

Uh, a lot of us are waiting in our relationships. Uh, perhaps we're single and we want to be married. Perhaps we're, we're married and we want to have kids or perhaps we have kids, but we're waiting for them to grow up and get out of the house.

[1 : 15] Uh, we're also waiting as neighbors in D.C. as we think about, um, the, our, our neighbors, uh, in our city. Uh, who experience, uh, marginalization and perhaps poverty. Uh, we wait for our city to be a place for, with more peace and shalom.

We're also waiting as a church, uh, as we've talked about a lot that we're waiting for a more permanent space, uh, where we can live out our life and our mission together. Um, so we're a people who wait, but the thing about waiting is that waiting is really painful.

Uh, in some way, shape, or form, all of us experience the ache of waiting, the ache of, of unfulfilled desires that we're longing to be, uh, satisfied. The ache of broken relationships that we're longing to be healed.

Um, and the ache of just living in a fallen world where things are not as they're supposed to be. And, uh, we come to the passage this morning with two women who knew what it meant to wait. And they knew, uh, the ache and the pain of waiting. Elizabeth and Mary. And like the rest of the people of Israel, they were waiting for the promised Messiah, the Savior that, that God promised to bring.

[2 : 23] But they were also waiting, uh, because they were pregnant. Uh, because they were expecting a child. Um, and so no doubt they were experiencing, uh, all the expectation and the anxiety. And even some of the pain that comes with waiting to be a mom.

Um, and what we see here in this passage in Luke 1 is that in the midst of their waiting, in the midst of their ache, uh, they encounter God. And in the midst of their ache, God brings great rejoicing into their lives.

And so what they show us and what I want us to see this morning is that even in the ache of waiting, that we can rejoice. And that we can rejoice because God is writing a story of reversal. He's writing a story of reversal about who really matters, about who is really blessed, about who really receives God's salvation, who is on the right side of history.

So we're going to look at two aspects of this reversal this morning that God brings, the story that he's writing. We're going to look at, uh, the reversal of who experiences God's blessing. And then secondly, we're going to look at how that reversal comes.

[3 : 27] So first, we're going to look at the reversal of who experiences God's blessing. So in the passage right before this, in Luke 1, uh, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her that she's with child, that she's pregnant.

And she, and Gabriel also tells her that her, her, uh, relative Elizabeth is also, uh, expecting to be pregnant with John the Baptist, uh, the prophet who is to come to prepare the way for Jesus. And Luke tells us that Elizabeth and Mary are relatives. He doesn't quite say how they're related. Uh, but Luke also tells us that both of these women experienced miraculous pregnancies. So in Luke 1, 5 through 25, we're told that Elizabeth has a miraculous pregnancy because of her age. Luke 1, 26 through 38, we're, we're told that Mary's pregnancy was miraculous because she was a virgin. And so upon hearing this news that not only was she pregnant, but her, her old, uh, relative was pregnant.

She has to go see her. So she rushes out into the countryside to see Elizabeth. It was probably a two to three day journey. And, um, and we can imagine some of the mix of emotions of what Mary feels as she's heading out to go see Elizabeth.

[4 : 33] She's probably feeling, uh, a mixture of uncertainty. Um, like, you know, are the people in my community, are, are they actually going to believe me when I tell them that they, I'm miraculously pregnant?

You know, are they actually going to believe me or are they just going to assume that I've been sleeping around? Uh, there's probably some anxiety about, uh, what does it mean for me to be the mother of God, uh, of the Messiah?

You know, what if, what if I mess up? You know, what if, what if Joseph and I run out of money?

You know, what if we can't feed our kid is, um, is ultimately the fate of human history, um, going to be thwarted because we are bad parents, you know?

Um, and so she's, uh, she's probably heading on this two to three day journey to go see Elizabeth, uh, with all of these, um, emotions swirling around inside her.

Um, and what Luke tells us is that she experiences the grace of God when she comes to Elizabeth's house before she even gets through the door. Uh, we're told that Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting and, and the, uh, John the Baptist leaps in her womb.

[5 : 34] Uh, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, uh, speaks an incredibly, uh, beautiful prophetic word over Mary. And she says, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Now, the reason why this is striking is that Elizabeth would have had no idea that Mary's pregnant. There was no, she, she didn't, uh, you know, there was no email. She didn't get a text message from Mary saying that she was pregnant. She might not even know that Mary was coming. It would have been too early for Mary to be showing. There's no way for Elizabeth to have known that she was pregnant. And yet, God, through the Holy Spirit, speaks this amazing, beautiful word of blessing over Mary through Elizabeth.

And in response, Mary bursts forth with praise and with worship and rejoicing to God. It's almost as if all the uncertainty and anxiety that she was, was swirling around inside her is quieted.

And it's, and this joy and worship to God bubbles forth. Uh, Mary's words here are known as the Magnificat. Um, it's a, it's a prayer, it's a song that's been used in the church's liturgy, uh, throughout the centuries.

[6 : 39] Um, it's a prayer that you'll find, uh, in the book of common prayer, uh, in morning and evening prayer. Um, and it's, they're amazing words. They're beautiful words. So we're going to look at them. So she starts in verses 46 and 47 by saying, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

What is, what does she rejoice in God for? Well, first she rejoices in what God has done for her individually. In verses 48 and 49, she says, For he has looked upon the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me. And holy is his name. It's this beautiful acknowledgement that God has seen her, and that he has chosen her, despite her low position.

Mary was a pregnant teenager. She was uneducated. She was probably poor, in a blue collar, low, lower class household, low, low social standing, part of a, in a, uh, minority oppressed religious group in the Roman Empire.

And yet she rejoices the fact that God has chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah. Her words here parallel Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2. Uh, Hannah was a mom in the Old Testament who, who also had a miraculous birth, and, and who gave birth to Samuel, uh, a man that, that God would use greatly in the life of the people of Israel.

[8 : 03] And so Mary, who's steeped in the stories of the Old Testament, recognizes that in the same way that, that God had blessed Hannah and used Hannah's son, that God was doing the same thing again for her.

That he's going to bring, uh, a, a, a son who's ultimately going to do great things and deliver Israel. And she is amazed. She's shocked. She's blown away that it would happen to her.

And so not only does she rejoice for what God has done for her individually, she also rejoices in what God has done for all people generally. In verses 50 to 53, she says, What do we see here? We see that Jesus, or, uh, that Mary is declaring the realities of God's salvation and his judgment. Mary's saying that the, the story that God is writing throughout human history is ultimately a story of reversal. And that that reversal happens both through salvation and through judgment.

[9 : 22] So the hungry are filled, but the rich are sent away empty. The humble, you know, the humble are exalted and the proud are scattered. The weak are lifted up and the powerful are brought down.

And Mary rejoices because she realizes that part of what it means for her to be the mother of the Messiah is that in the grand scheme of human history, God is not on the side of the rich and the powerful and the famous.

Rather, he is on the side of the humble and the weak and the poor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who is a German theologian and pastor who was executed under the Nazi regime, under Hitler, says this, commenting on this passage.

He says that God is not ashamed to be with those of humble state. God does his miracles where we least expect it. He loves the lost, the forgotten, the insignificant, the outcasts, the weak and the broken.

Where men say lost, he says found. Where men say condemned, he says redeemed. Where men say no, he says yes. Where men say contemptible, God says blessed.

[10 : 32] Where men look with indifference or superiority, he looks with burning love, such as nowhere else is to be found. Listen, Jesus wasn't born in an Ivy League family with a trust fund and lots of connections on Capitol Hill and Wall Street.

No, he was born to two parents in Nazareth with little to no money, little to no college education, few connections. And this reality, the fact that Jesus came to be born to parents of such a humble position, what it means for us is that this pretty much reverses all of our social and economic and political categories.

It's a reversal of who's important and who's unimportant. Of the haves and the have-nots. Of the insiders and the outsiders. The good people and the bad people. Who's significant, who's insignificant.

Socially, what it means is that there's no ethnicity, there's no race, there's no group of people, there's zip code or neighborhood that's superior towards one another. You know, if God can come and be born to parents who are from Nazareth, there's no social or ethnic pride that we can have. Economically, it means that true wealth, true riches, has little to nothing to do with material goods and money. Politically, it means that no human authority, no human government has ultimate power.

[11 : 50] And just to help you understand how charged these words are, that Mary says there have literally been governments throughout history that have banned these words.

That have banned the public praying or singing of these words. Because they knew how politically subversive they were. Because what it means is that all human governments are under the sovereign rule of God.

They are ultimately derivative of a greater king. Because God brings down rulers from their thrones. But he exalts the humble. Listen, do we, is this something that we embody in our lives?

Is this something that, this kind of reversal, do we embody this reversal as a church? Do we associate with people of different social or economic status? Or are we ashamed of people who would, society would think would be unimportant or insignificant?

You know, if I'm honest, I think it's easy in a place like Washington, D.C. to only want to associate, to only want to be around people with power and money and influence. But God says that's not the story that I'm writing.

[12 : 54] I'm writing a story of reversal where the poor are rich and where the humble are exalted. You know, think about the ultimate goal of your work or your vocation.

Is the ultimate goal of your work to exalt yourself, to gain greater position, to get a bigger salary, to have lots of power and influence? Or ultimately, is the goal of your work to humble yourself and to exalt others, to seek their flourishing, to seek their good, to solve their problems?

You know, I think this image of reversal is actually a great image for our vocations in this world. You know, I love the fact that, you know, we're a church that partners with D.C. 127.

And, you know, their mission statement is an amazing mission statement. Their mission statement is the reversal of the foster care list in Washington, D.C. I think that that is a beautiful mission statement because it reflects the heart of God, which is ultimately to bring about a redemptive reversal in this world.

You know, what kind of reversal does your work, does your vocation ultimately bring about? Maybe it's something obvious, like poverty or injustice or something like that.

[14:12] But maybe it's not as obvious. Maybe it's not as obvious to think, what are the things that my work in this world is trying to reverse? I think that in a way that all of our work is, in a way, all about the reversal of chaos.

That we live in a fallen world and things tend towards chaos, but the human vocation is to bring order to where there is disorder, to bring, to reverse chaos.

I think this is what parenting is. I think parenting is the reversal of chaos, which is why I think it's so difficult. But Mary's point, Mary's heart, her joy is ultimately pointing us to the fact that God is writing a story of reversal.

So where our social, our political, our economic categories are totally flipped upside down. And the question for us this morning is, do our lives line up with that story? Does our life as a church line up with that story?

So we see the reversal of who experiences God's blessing. And then secondly, we see how that reversal comes. We see how that reversal comes. If you notice in the text, when it was read, when Kevin read it earlier, that it seems that Mary is acting with confidence as if these things have already happened.

[15:28] So a lot of the verbs here are in the past tense. That he has brought down the proud. That he has filled the hungry. That he has sent the rich away empty. And that should bring for us attention as we read this text.

Because in verse 56, it says that after three months of being with Elizabeth, that Mary returned home to Nazareth. To her old life. To the home that she lived in.

To be engaged to the same carpenter that she was engaged to. Nothing's changed for her. And yet, she's rejoicing as if everything's changed.

You know? So what do we do with this? The key to seeing how God's reversal comes is actually to look at verses 54 and 55. Which say that he has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy.

As he spoke to our fathers. To Abraham and to his offspring forever. Mary is recalling the covenant promise that God had made to Israel. That he had made to Abraham.

[16:29] That it was going to be through him. It was going to be through his seed and through his family. That he was going to bless all the nations of the earth. And as the story of the Old Testament unfolds and goes on. We see with greater and greater clarity how this is actually going to work.

We see that what's going to happen is that God is going to bring a king. Whom God is going to bless. And it's through the kingship of that king. It's going to be a king in the line of David.

And it's through his kingship that God is going to bless the whole world. And Mary is rejoicing in the fact that that king is her son. This is what Gabriel tells her in the passage just before this.

In Luke 1, 32 and 33. Gabriel tells her that your son will be great. And he will be called son of the most high. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

And his kingdom. And of his kingdom there will be no end. Mary understands that the baby that is growing inside her is going to grow up to be a king who has an everlasting kingdom.

[17:30] And this is ultimately a fulfillment of everything that the Old Testament points towards. The Old Testament had, the Old Testament prophets had promised and announced that God was writing a story of reversal.

That there would be a king who would come. Whose mission would be nothing less than the entire restoration of the entire cosmos. Nothing less than the complete reversal of sin and death and evil and justice.

So part of the way that the prophet Isaiah pictures it is that when the Messiah, when the king would come. That people would beat their swords into plowshares. That the wolf would lie down with the lamb.

That every valley would be raised up. That every mountain would be exalted. The picture in the Old Testament prophets is the restoration of the entire cosmos. Back to the way God designed it. Back to the way that things were meant to be. By reversing the curse. Reversing the effects of sin and death. That's the mission of the king. Isaac Watts gets it right in his hymn, Joy to the World, that we sing around Advent and Christmas time.

[18 : 38] That line where he says that he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. Far as the curse is found. That's the mission of the king.

To reverse the effects of sin. And to bring the restoration of the whole creation. And Mary is rejoicing because even though this reversal isn't fully complete.

That it has already begun. And the reversal has begun because the king has come. And the arrival of the king means that God is fulfilling his promises to reverse the effects of sin and death.

And she rejoices with the confidence that says not only is this going to happen. It's as good as done. It's inevitable. It's as good as done. So, if you think, you know, a couple of just illustrations. If you think about when you're depositing a check to your bank account through your phone. And you take out your mobile app and you take a picture of the check on the front. And you take a picture of the check on the back.

[19 : 38] And you hit deposit. You hit confirm. You know. What happens is, you know, you've, you've, the transaction is now pending. The bank has to review it. The security team has to look at it. Make sure it's valid. Right.

So, you have to wait for the money to get into your account. But really, it's, it's as good as done.

Another illustration is, you know, thinking about when you graduate from college. And you've finished all your classes.

You've, you've taken all your exams. You know, you've completed all your degree requirements.

You, you go to your graduation ceremony. You walk the stage. People clap for you. You know, and then the ceremony's over.

You've graduated. It's done. But then what happens? You've got to wait, like, months for that diploma to arrive. Because they don't give you your actual diploma on the graduation. But, so you've got to wait.

You've got to wait for your diploma to come. But the reality is, it's as good as done. You've already completed. The work has already been accomplished. You're still waiting. But you can rejoice in the fact that the victory is inevitable.

[20 : 38] Mary understands that the fulfillment of the reversal that God is beginning through the baby in her womb is so inevitable that she can rejoice as if it's already happened.

And the good news for us this morning is that we can have the same kind of joy that Mary had.

Because the baby in Mary's womb accomplished the victory of the kingdom in our place.

Because his victory was a victory of reversal. Earlier we saw that the story that God is writing is a story that brings both salvation and judgment.

Where the humble are exalted. The proud are cast down. The hungry are filled. The rich are sent away empty. And we see that most clearly in Jesus. The gospel is a gospel of reversal.

The gospel is that Jesus Christ took on the judgment that you and I deserved. So that we might receive the blessing that he deserved. And Mary's song points us to the reversal that God accomplished for us in Jesus.

[21 : 40] He was God. He was infinitely powerful. He was infinitely rich. He was infinitely exalted. And yet, he humbled himself. And he became weak.

And he became poor. He lived the life, the perfect life that deserved all of God's blessing. And yet, in his death on the cross, he received only God's judgment. This is why Christianity is the complete reverse of every religion, of every moral code out there.

See, morality and religion say live a good life, do the right things, and you'll be blessed. Christianity, the gospel, says the complete reverse. It says there's no amount of good things that you can do.

There's no amount of religious works that you can do. It can't be done. Real blessing doesn't come that way. Our sin problem is too great. No, the only way to be saved, the only way to receive God's blessing, is to have the Son of God completely reverse places with you.

So, one of my favorite books, one of my favorite stories of all time, is *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. And it's a story that begins with that famous line, you know, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

[22 : 46] And it's set in the French Revolution. And two of the main characters in the story are Sidney Carton and Charles Darnay. And over the course of their story, their friendship grows.

But one thing that's striking is that these two guys look a lot alike. They have a lot of physical resemblances to each other. And as the story goes on, Charles Darnay is actually arrested and he's tried and he's found guilty of conspiring with the French aristocracy.

This is after the storming of the Bastille. It's during the reign of terror and where a lot of French aristocrats were being arrested and killed. And Darnay is sentenced to death.

But he's got a wife, he's got a kid, and Carton doesn't. So, Sidney Carton, his friend, decides to do something. And he goes and visits his friend, Charles Darnay, in the middle of the night and visits his prison cell.

And he actually tricks him, he drugs him, makes him unconscious. And they actually switch clothes. And he has a friend carry Charles Darnay out of the cell, out of the prison, while Sidney Carton remains in the cell.

[24 : 03] And the next day, Sidney Carton is carried to the guillotine. But no one notices the difference because of their physical resemblance. But Sidney Carton, ultimately, he goes to the guillotine for his friend.

He reverses places with him. And it's that line that maybe is familiar to you, where Sidney Carton is going to the guillotine. He's going to lay down his life for his friend.

And he says, it's a far, far better thing that I do than I've ever done. And it's a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever done. And that's what Jesus did for us.

Salvation comes through reversal. Jesus Christ, the king of the universe, reversing places with sinners, taking on our sin, our shame, our guilt, and absorbing the wrath of God and our place.

And in return, we receive his righteousness. We receive his victory over sin and death. But not only that, we receive the power and the riches and the status of the kingdom.

[25 : 05] But it's not just everybody who experiences this reversal. It's only those who can come with nothing. It's only those who come hungry. Those only who come weak and poor.

Who admit that they have nothing to offer God. That they have no religious credentials. That they can't fix themselves. They can't outrun. They can't outperform their guilt or their shame.

They don't have it together. They're spiritually bankrupt. They know they need a savior. Those are the ones who experience the reversal that Jesus did in our place. And those are ultimately the ones who are filled.

Those are ultimately the ones who are exalted. Those who are blessed. It's like if you were in a situation where you had all these debts. You had all these loans that you couldn't pay off. And you realize the only way out was to file for bankruptcy.

And so you file for bankruptcy and you have a meeting with your creditors. And they meet with you and they're looking at all your debts. All your loans. And they say, okay, Mr. Simpson, we've decided to go through with bankruptcy.

[26 : 10] We've canceled all your debts. We've canceled all your loans. You're forgiven. You're free to go. Is that the gospel? That's only a part of the gospel.

It's only half the gospel. The gospel isn't just that your debts have been paid and you're free to go.

The gospel is also that you're free to come. The gospel is more like you're in that meeting with your creditors and you've got all these loans you can't pay off.

Got all these debts. And the CEO of Capital One comes in the room and he says, here's what we're going to do. Not only are we going to cancel your debts, not only are we going to pay back your loans.

But Mr. Simpson, here's what we've decided to do. I'm going to transfer the title of CEO to you.

You're now the CEO of Capital One Bank. And here's my personal bank account number and the routing number.

My bank account's yours now. And here's the keys to that car outside, that Ferrari. It's yours now. And here's another set of keys. That's the keys to my house. And here's the keys to my beach house.

[27 : 15] You know, that's what the gospel is. It's the complete reversal where Christ takes on our sin and we get all the riches of him and his kingdom. You know, one of the things I try to tell students at Maryland all the time is that you don't actually really understand union with Christ.

You don't fully understand what it means to be united with Jesus until you understand that what the New Testament says about our relationship to him sounds utterly ridiculous.

It sounds utterly ridiculous because you get to places in Colossians 3 where it talks about how that we've been raised with Christ. That we are seated with him in the heavenly realms.

That our lives are hidden with him. And if you think about it, that sounds ridiculous. It's like, no, I'm not. Like, I'm seated in an auditorium at Luke Seymour High School in Brooklyn.

Like, that's where I'm at. But the gospel is that not only are you seated in an auditorium in Brooklyn, but you are also raised with Christ.

[28 : 19] You are seated with him in the heavenly realms. Your life is hidden with him. Listen, do you know what kind of language that is? It's the language of royalty. It's the language of a king.

Listen, how are the humble exalted? How do the poor become rich? How are the hungry filled? It's through union with the king. By being clothed with his righteousness.

By being heirs of his kingdom. And not only has he given us the riches of his kingdom, but he has also entrusted us with the mission and the message of the kingdom.

To proclaim and to demonstrate to the world a message of reversal that it is in Jesus Christ that the humble are filled. Sorry, that the humble are exalted. That the hungry are filled.

The poor become rich. And what the season of Advent reminds us, what Luke chapter 1 reminds us, is that even those things are true now.

[29 : 19] They're fully and completely true because of what Christ has accomplished for us. That is also true that we're still waiting. It's also true that we're still waiting for the kingdom to come in its fullness.

Like Mary, all of us are going to go back and we're going to leave this place. And we're going to go back to situations in our lives where we're still waiting. Where we still experience the ache and the pain of waiting.

Where there's still tears. Where there's still sorrow. Where there's still pain. But the message of Advent is that as we wait, that there is a joy that goes deeper than the ache.

Because we have a king who has accomplished a victory that's as good as done. One of my favorite scenes in Lord of the Rings is in the third book, The Return of the King.

After the ring has been destroyed. And Sam and Frodo are rescued by the eagles. And they're taken to Gondor. And they wake up in Gondor.

[30 : 18] And Sam wakes up before Frodo. And Sam is trying to figure out, like, did all this really happen? Was it a dream? Or was it real? And then he sees Gandalf. And he's reminded that, yeah, it was actually real.

All of this stuff actually happened. You know, the enemy has been defeated. The ring's been destroyed. And then he asks Gandalf this question. And Sam says, Gandalf is now the time when everything sad is going to come untrue.

And I love that question. And the answer that if we're in Christ, if we belong to Jesus, the answer to that question is absolutely yes.

That we rejoice in the future where everything sad is going to come untrue. Because we have a king who's writing a story of reversal. Because Jesus Christ came into the world.

And he reversed the power of sin and death. And it's a story where, even though we ache in our waiting, it's a story where the ache doesn't get the last word.

[31 : 21] It's a story where our pain doesn't get the last word. Where our sorrow doesn't get the last word. Where cancer doesn't get the last word. Where injustice doesn't get the last word.

Jesus does. Because he's the king who has come and will come again. And so the invitation this morning for us is to rejoice in the king of reversal.

To rejoice in the victory that he accomplished for us in his death and resurrection. And to rejoice at the final fulfillment of that victory is as good as done. It's inevitable. That as we do that, as we rejoice in the king of reversal, that we are also called to become the people of reversal.

To see ourselves as those who are united with Jesus and empowered by his spirit. To be about his kingdom work of reversal in this world. And to bring that kingdom of reversal to bear in our homes and in our jobs, in our neighborhoods.

To see the humble exalted. To see the hungry filled. To see the poor become rich. Because in Jesus Christ, we know that that is what has already happened for us. That we're in him.

[32 : 29] That we're royalty. And what we experience in Christ now is only a taste of what's to come. And because of that, we can find incredible joy.

We can find incredible rejoicing. Even in the waiting. Even as we ache for him to come again. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.