

“An Upside Down Christmas”

Luke 1:46-56

Series: The Promise of Christmas Week 1. I Will Lift You Up From Discouragement

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Now is the time for the great Christmas controversy. No I'm not talking Rudolph vs. the Grinch, ham vs. turkey, Scrooge vs. George Bailey. I'm talking about the big one: Christmas tree – fresh or fake? This is a debate you don't want to start. The artificial aficionados argue their trees can sit in the attic, fully loaded and instantly ready for you to rock around it. They last for years and don't cause an allergic reaction. The cut-your-own crowd love carrying it home from the field, filling the house with its fragrance, hanging lights and ornaments on its natural boughs.

Well, to make this dispute more difficult, stores now offer a third option: the upside-down Christmas tree. Hammacher Schlemmer, sells a 7-foot tall tree pre-lit with over 800 commercial grade lights. This technological marvel goes for the low price of \$599.95. Don't try to buy it – they're all sold out. Why would anyone want an upside-down Christmas tree? According to Hammacher Schlemmer's website: “The inverted shape makes it easier to see ornaments, which hang away from the dense needles.” This is certainly a space saving tree though there are two problems with it: 1) how will Santa stick your presents to the ceiling? and 2) how is your cat going to knock it down?

Every year it seems our celebration of Christmas is more upside-down. Christmas is less about Christ and more about *mas* – mas presents, mas decorations, mas spending. It's less about a humble baby born to a poor, homeless family and more about glitz and glitter, and glamour. It's less about Almighty God's salvation and more about Amazon and Google sales. It's less about helping the poor and needy and more about helping ourselves to more stuff.

If you see something upside down for long enough, your brain adapts to it. In the 1890s, a University of California psychologist named George Stratton strapped on some glasses which made everything he saw upside down. After wearing them for short periods, his vision was instantly restored. Then he wore them for eight straight days. By day five his brain started to see the upside down images as right side up. Once your brain adjusts to the change, the upside down world suddenly seems normal.

There is a lot in our world that is upside down: a rising tide of addiction, a widening gap between rich and poor, the spreading darkness of terror, the expanding power of slave trafficking, the breakup of marriages and families, and the decrease in faith. Sadly, the more these upside down trends grow, the more normal they appear to us.

In each of our lives we might wear upside down glasses which make chaos seem normal. You might be wearing the upside down glasses of money and possessions, alcohol, drugs, an affair, workaholicism, pleasing people, perfectionism – over time the images start to appear ordinary, even right. Your soul is the lens of your life. It is the way

things enter into you. Maybe the lens of your soul is stained by sin or scratched by a poor self-image. Maybe it's cracked by abuse. If your soul sees things upside down, eventually you will feel discouraged.

In our Advent Series *The Promise of Christmas* we will discover five promises God makes to us through the Christmas story. The first promise is: "I will lift you up from discouragement." Discouragement means some circumstance or situation in your life causes you to lose your courage. You feel depressed, defeated, pushed down, put down. And perhaps you've been upside down for so long it's starting to feel normal. Yet God makes a promise to you. He will lift you up from discouragement. In the story of Christmas Jesus comes to turn our upside down world the right way.

One of the lowliest individuals in her day was Mary, the mother of Jesus. If you draw a chart of powerful people in the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus and Herod would be at the top and Mary would be at the bottom. There is a lot in Mary's life to make one discouraged. She lives in a village so tiny it does not make it onto anyone's map. As a Jew under the dominion of Rome, she has no rights, privileges, or protections. Diseases and famine are rampant making life expectancy short. She doesn't have a bank account. She has no hope of an education beyond learning to spin, weave, raise animals and children, cook and keep house. She probably has no say in who she will marry. Her father chooses for her. Perhaps the only thing she can hope for is a marriage to a kind and righteous man and a quiet life in her village. Then an angel arrives to turn everything upside down.

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. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be (Luke 1:26-29).

Mary is deeply disturbed by Gabriel's greeting. The angel can see the fear and confusion written across her young face. Quickly, he tries to reassure her.

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" (Luke 1:30-33).

Her son will be the long-awaited Messiah. For the first time in five centuries someone will sit on David's throne. Her child will be the King who reigns forever. She who is from the downside of society will have a Son who sits up on top.

After Mary agrees to be the mother of Jesus, she travels south from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea near Jerusalem to be with her relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah

who are also expecting a child. Apparently the Holy Spirit can't keep a secret because Elizabeth already knows about Mary's impending pregnancy. Elizabeth says,

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!
(Luke 1:45)

Mary knows the promise is not just for her. The Lord promises to lift many like her up from discouragement. And He will do this by turning everything upside down. She proclaims this in a song which generations have called by its Latin name *The Magnificat*.

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. (Luke 1:46-49)

This is Good News for those who are on **The Downside of Life**. Mary gives us a new glimpse of God. The Most High God enters the world at the most lowly place. The most powerful God is born into a powerless family. The One who possess all the riches of the universe lives in poverty. The Master over all grows up under Roman oppression. God makes his home among the down and out and discouraged.

There is a lot of discouragement in our day. The Hayden Planetarium in New York City issued an invitation to all those who were interested in applying to be a part of the crew on the first journey to another planet. Eighteen thousand people applied. They gave the applications to a panel of psychologists, who examined them thoroughly and came to the conclusion that in the vast majority of incidents, those who applied did so because they were discouraged with their lives here and hoped they could find a new life somewhere else.¹

Discouragement is one of the most powerful tools in the Devil's kit. If he can keep us focused inward on ourselves, he can cut us off from God's help. We don't need to travel to another planet to find hope. According to Mary God has visited this planet. His greatest promise, throughout Scripture is "I am with you."

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)

When you are down and in the pit of discouragement, you need to know you are not alone. We need someone to lift us up out of the darkness. God uses people, like Mary, to bring His uplifting presence into our lives.

Tim Sanders is the former Chief Solutions Officer at Yahoo! In his book *Love Is the Killer App* he advises supervisors to lead through loving. He tells them to encourage and affirm their employees.

¹ Bruce Thielemann, "Dealing with Discouragement," Preaching Today.

A young manager named Steve resolved to visit each of his employees and tell each of them how much he appreciated them, and name one thing they did excellently. After the visit from Steve, one of his software engineers, Lenny, presented him with an Xbox gaming console. Steve was taken aback, as he knew Lenny had taken pay cuts over the last year. But he was more surprised to learn that the money had come from the sale of a nine-millimeter pistol—a pistol Lenny had bought months earlier with the intention of killing himself. Lenny told him of his mother's death the previous year, and of his ensuing loneliness and depression:

I started a routine every night after work: eating a bowl of Ramen, listening to Nirvana, and getting the gun out. It took almost a month to get the courage to put the bullets in the gun. For the last few weeks, I was putting ever so slight pressure on the trigger, and I was getting so close, Steve—so close.

Last week, you freaked me out. You came into my cubicle, put your arm around me, and told me you appreciated me because I turn in all my projects early, and that helps you sleep at night. You also said that I have a great sense of humor over e-mail and that you are glad I came into your life.

That night I went home, ate Ramen, and listened to Nirvana—and when I got the gun out, it scared me silly for the first time. All I could think about was what you said—that you were glad I came into your life.

The next day I went back to the pawnshop and sold the gun. I remembered that you had said you wanted the Xbox more than anything, but with a new baby at home could not afford it. So, for my life, you get this game. Thanks, boss.

"Sometimes people just need people," Sanders writes. "They need encouragement. You have no idea how lonely and sad some people might be. Love them everywhere—not just at home, but at work, or wherever you find them."²

God came in person, in the flesh, into our world, right into your darkness and discouragement to tell you, "I am with you. I love you. I want to lift you up." Mary declares:

God has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things. (Luke 1:52-53)

If you are on the downside of life, take His hand.

As Mary continues with her song she also sings about **The Upside of Life** which has three dark dimensions. First there is **Pride**. She sings,

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts" (Luke 1:55).

²From an e-mail newsletter by Tim Sanders

This is not the positive pride, pride in your ethnic heritage or “proud to be an American.” Perhaps better words are arrogance, selfishness or self-centeredness. The problem with pride is it maximizes my importance and minimizes everything and everyone else, including God. Pride, over time, tends to push people far away. Few people can stand to be around selfishness for very long. Most of the world’s problems - war, injustice, prejudice, divorce, and broken families - have their root in the soil of selfish pride.

There are actually two types of pride – both cause problems. The obvious one puffs you up. You put yourself first. You place your wishes and your will ahead of everyone else’s. When they open the doors on Black Friday you see this type of pride in action. The other, less obvious form is reverse pride. If the first kind puffs you up, in the second kind you put yourself down. Those who suffer from reverse pride often say, “I’m no good. I always fail. I deserve this.” It sounds humble but it’s really hurtful and harmful. It’s a form of self-pity. It attracts the comfort and concern of others...for a while. But soon, people’s compassion wears out and it becomes just a pity party for one. So one type of pride magnifies strengths, the other majors in weaknesses. But both focus on me. What’s the solution? Instead of puffing yourself up or putting yourself down, put the focus on God and others. So don’t think less of yourself, just think about yourself less and others more.

The second trouble with Upside is **Position**. Mary sings, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:52). In Mary’s day, rulers sat high above everyone else on a throne to emphasize their position and power over their subjects. Humble peasants were not allowed to approach the throne or even look the ruler in the eye. All heads had to be down. Over the centuries, Mary’s home in Galilee was ruled by a succession of such emperors – Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Maccabeans, Romans and Herodians. She probably also knew no matter how powerful these kings felt, every one of them was knocked down from his position by the next conqueror. Her Son, however, would be a different ruler. He willingly came down from the highest position, from the throne of heaven, to live in the lowest position on earth – a manger, a cross, a tomb. He came not to put people down but to lift the humble up.

You and I are each placed in a position of power. It may be a position of authority, influence and respect at school, in the home, at work, in this community, here at church. How are you using your power and position? Are you lifting people up or putting them down?

The third trouble with the Upside is **Possessions**. Mary continues her song by singing: “He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:53). None of us would call ourselves rich. Yet by every possible comparison with the majority of the world, we are rich. And yet, our celebration of Christmas is focused on filling our overstuffed homes with more riches. We also know riches will not make us happier. In fact they often cause more stress. We have to find them, go into debt for them, store them, maintain them, insure them, repair them, and get rid of them. How would Mary want us to celebrate the birthday of her Son? By filling the hungry with good

things. These are the people who are empty, lonely, lost. These are the physically hungry and the spiritually hungry.

This Christmas you and I have an incredible opportunity to celebrate the birthday of Jesus the way His Mother would want us to. We can turn things upside down by letting go of our pride, position and possessions and lifting up others who are down in discouragement. You can give to Family Promise, Urban Promise and Wells in Mozambique. You can bring your Reverse Advent Calendar on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. You can give your time to help with homework and make meals for Urban Promise and stay overnight with Family Promise. I've stayed overnight and it's the easiest thing to do, yet if we don't have people to do it we can't host families who are desperate and discouraged by life. You are making a difference. Here is the story of one family who made the journey from homeless to hopeful.

I have two girls and I lost my job and I went through my savings trying to pay for rent and couldn't find work in time to sustain it. I ended up getting evicted and I didn't know where my girls were going to go.

We were sitting in the library and I kept calling around all these different places trying to see if there was any place that could help us. I gave Family Promise a call. Christine answered and told me she could meet with me the next day. We were very, very blessed to find a place that could take us so fast. It was scary moment there for a while.

I'm extremely grateful that Family Promise was here for us. The first church we came to was actually here at Woodside. My little one loves it here. It was very welcoming considering I felt very nervous and a little on edge because you don't know coming into this situation how things are going to be. But everyone was extremely nice and very welcoming.

The biggest thing is for us to get our own place and be happy with my girls. It's a trying time and it puts some things in perspective about what's important.

After their stay at Woodside, Family Promise helped this Mom and her two daughter move into a place of their own. Now they are home.

There's a lot that's upside down in our world. Let's work with God to turn things right side up.