

December 16, 2012
It's a Wonderful Life

Believe It
Luke 1:47-55

Opening words:

During this season of Advent I have been using the classic Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, as a backdrop for my sermon series. This Frank Capra movie stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. How many times have you seen the movie? How many of you have watched it more than once? It speaks to every generation because everyone can relate to Jimmy Stewart's character, George Bailey. How many of your dreams have been crushed by responsibilities? May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Luke 1:47-55. Let me call this message *It's a Wonderful Life: Believe it.*

Luke 1:47-55

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
53 He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

How many of you have seen the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*? Then, you know the storyline. Absent minded Uncle Billy has lost \$8,000 of the Bailey Building and Loan's money. The bank examiner suddenly arrives and George begins to panic. Without success, George looks everywhere for the money. With his shattered dreams in his hands, he decides to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. He is saved by his guardian angel, angel second class, Clarence Oddbody. He is the one who grants George's wish.

He shows George what his world would be like if he had never been born. The picture is not pretty. His wife never married so his children were never born. His mother struggles for survival. His brother drowns so others he had saved die. His uncle was institutionalized. His town, Bedford Falls, was run by his enemy, Mr. Potter. It is now called Potterville. In light of this new information George begins to realize the difference he has made on his world. With no where else to go, he returns to the bridge and asks for his old life back. He wants to live! George is a changed man and the transformation is complete. The life that seemed so pointless suddenly has meaning. How do you feel about your life? How would your world change if you had never have been born? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" Never underestimate the difference you have made in this world. Let us look at this morning's Gospel lesson together.

The great challenge of this morning's scripture lesson is forgetting everything you know about Mary. I don't want to be cruel. However, I do want to be Biblically correct. The images that stand in your family nativity are wrong. Someday I will tell you everything that is wrong but not today. The only image I want you to remember in your nativity is Mary. In most nativities she is a young woman in her twenties. In some, she has blond hair. There are two problems with that image. First, people in the Middle East do not have blond hair. Second, Mary was not in her twenties. She was somewhere between the age of thirteen and sixteen. That was common in her age. Her and Joseph's marriage was an arranged marriage He may have been thirty. The scripture tells us they were betrothed. In other words, they were not legally married but they were legally bound. They acted like they were married in every way but one, sex. That fact is important because Mary is pregnant. Did you hear what I said? Mary was pregnant without the use of a man. Jesus' birth was a virgin birth. This pregnant woman was sexually innocent. Let me say this next line clearly.

The story of Christmas begins with an unwanted pregnancy. It is not pretty but it is true. Annually, I read this passage and wonder why God put Mary in such a position. Could there not have been a different way? This pregnancy was the best thing that ever happened to Mary; this pregnancy was the worst thing that ever happened to Mary. Just think about it for a minute. With all the women that have ever lived in this world God only chose one to be the mother of his son. As Protestant's we don't want to look too Catholic so we are uncomfortable saying it. However, we have to say it. We both admire and respect Mary. On the other hand, this pregnancy was the worst thing that ever happened to her. Unlike our time, we lived in moral times. Her personal reputation was ruined and she was a black sheep in the family. She cried tears of joy at the birth of Jesus; she cried tears of sorrow at his execution. This unwanted pregnancy changed everything. Yet, in the face of all this uncertainty she praises God.

The piece of scripture we look at this morning is Mary's response to this unwanted pregnancy. It has been called the Magnificat, which means "glorifies." It comes from the first verse of the passage, "*My soul glorifies the Lord.*" It is a great piece of scripture because it reveals Mary's faith in God. We do not have that kind of faith. With her eyes fixed on eternity, she surrendered her life to God. That is not an easy thing to do. How far do you trust God? No one has ever trusted God as much as Mary. Most of the time we are more like Jacob.

You remember the story. We spent last summer with him. After a period of time of living in a foreign land, Jacob returns home. It was not just a matter of personal choice. It was all part of the divine plan. At first, Jacob is open to the idea. He was tired of eating foreign food and being a foreigner. He longs for what is comfortable; He longs for what is familiar. With every step he is closer to home and closer to his former life. That is the problem. It was the same life he ran from years earlier. Do you remember? His red hairy brother Esau is waiting for him to return. Jacob dreaded their reunion. After all, Jacob had taken everything from him. How much did Jacob dread their reunion? He dreaded their reunion to the point Jacob actually wrestled with God. Jacob's return home was all part of the divine plan but Jacob wrestled with God. Jacob had a few questions about the divine plan so he wrestled with God. Have you ever wrestled with God? Have you always agreed with God's plan for your life? That is what makes Mary so amazing. She simply surrenders to God's will. Saint Maximilian Kolbe once said, *"Never be afraid of loving the Blessed Virgin too much. You can never love her more than Jesus did."* What part of your life are you willing to surrender to God? How much of your personal **agenda** are you willing to sacrifice to serve God? Are you willing to sacrifice your **social standing** to serve God? How much of your **money** are you will to sacrifice to serve God? It is those three things I want to look at today. I am going to illustrate each one by some personal experiences. I am going to throw a little George Bailey in there too. So if you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

Your Agenda

Mary accepted this unwanted pregnancy and surrendered her agenda. Answer this question. What would have happened to Mary if God would have chosen another woman to birth his son? This is the answer. Mary would have done what Mary wanted to do. In other words, she would have made her choices within her society's expectations. It is safe to say, Mary would have married Joseph and birthed only his children. She would have never have made the pages of the Bible. She would have lived a common life. That is all Mary expected; that is all Mary wanted. This unwanted pregnancy changed everything. How has Jesus altered your agenda? The other night I attended the Children's Academy Christmas party. I go annually. Through the years I have met many wonderful people through the daycare. One woman came up to me and gave me a big hug. I hadn't seen her in years. She said to me, "Russ, it is great to see you. I can't believe you are still here. Usually, the Methodists are always moving their people." This is not the first time I have heard that statement. I responded in the usual way. "They are trying to isolate the damage to one place." Can I be honest with you? When I came here nineteen years ago I didn't think I would still be here. I wanted to serve a large church and make a name for myself. However, my life has not unfolded that way. I have wrestled with God over this point. There were years during the appointment season, I wanted that call. However, when the call came I fought to stay here. There are days I am still frustrated by my own lack of success. I do not feel like an ultra success in my life but I do believe God wants me here. Can anyone here relate to my story? Like George Bailey, you refuse to see your life as something special. We are more like Jacob, then we are like Mary.

She accepted this unwanted pregnancy and surrendered her personal agenda. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" She surrendered her agenda.

Your Social Standing

Mary accepted this unwanted pregnancy and surrendered her social standing. For the rest of her life she was identified as the woman who had this child out of wedlock. She was the topic of many gossiping conversations. Her reputation was destroyed and she was an embarrassment to her family. This unwanted pregnancy changed everything. How has Jesus changed your social standing?

The other day, I attended the Lane Funeral Home pastor appreciation brunch. There were just a little handful of us. I knew just about everyone there. That is why I was surprised. When I sat at the table with one the staff members at Lane's said, "We better behave! We have a preacher sitting with us!" Do you know how many times I have heard that line? Do you know how sick I am of that line? Funeral directors and ministers are similar in several ways. One of the ways is the stigma that comes with the vocation. People just don't know how cool we are. You know it is true. There is a stigma that comes with being a minister. There is a stigma that goes with being a Christian. The worst thing you can do for your social standing is talk about Jesus. How important is being accepted to you? George Bailey wanted to see the world. We just want to be accepted by our world. We are more like Jacob, then we are Mary. She accepted this unwanted pregnancy and surrendered her social standing. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" She surrendered her agenda. She surrendered her social standing.

Your Money

Mary accepted this unwanted pregnancy and surrendered her money. On the night Jesus was born, Mary's heart was filled with joy. Two years later, Magi appeared from the east to worship him. They brought gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense. That was the only financial compensation she would ever receive. Jesus was no different from any other child. With his birth came extra expenses. Did you know it costs \$235,000 to raise a child up to the age of 17? That does not include college expenses. This unwanted pregnancy changed everything. How much is Jesus costing you?

Years ago, I officiated at a wedding in the Cleveland area. After the service, the photographer began taking pictures. I sat in the back and watched. A gentleman came up to me and introduced himself as the groom's uncle. We began to talk. He pointed out one of the ushers. He was another nephew. He told me about the young man. He was bright and full of potential. He said, "You will never guess what he wants to do with his life?" I just looked at him. I didn't have a clue. He said, "He wants to be a preacher." I thought, "That is great!" He said, "What a waste! He could do anything and make big money but he wants to be a preacher." You know it is true. If you are going to follow Jesus then it is going to cost you. I don't just mean ministers. I mean true disciples. If you are going to follow Jesus then how are you going to ignore the financial needs of your church? If you are going to follow Jesus then how are you going to ignore the needs of this world? How you handle your money reveals your priorities. How great of a priority is Jesus to you? George Bailey was spending all of his money on the people in his life. Where do you spend your money?

We are more like Jacob than we are Mary. She accepted this unwanted pregnancy and surrendered some of her money. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Mary surrendered her agenda. Mary surrendered her social standing. Mary surrendered some of her money.

You know the scene. George Bailey stood on the bridge. It was the same bridge he had visited in the past. At that time he was going to end his life. This time he was praying. He had learned a few things about his life. His life wasn't pointless. His life had meaning. It was unfolding just as God planned. He surrendered to God and embraced every day. Is there a George Bailey in the crowd? Is there anyone here who is wrestling with God for control? Bruce Wilkinson once said, "*Dependence upon God makes heroes of ordinary people like you and me!*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"