

Imagine someone with a terminal degree being appointed to the Supreme Court. Imagine Wells Fargo naming a high school dropout as their next CEO. Imagine a 150 pound offensive lineman starting for the Ravens. Imagine the United States losing a war with Belgium.

That's what happening in today's texts: Israel's ruler comes from Bethlehem, too small to be listed among the clans of Judah. A teenage girl named Mary ushers God into the world. Jesus doesn't bring thousands and thousands of bulls and goats to the altar to atone for the sin of the world; He just brings Himself. And the place where the Holy Spirit was moving in power and glory two thousand years ago was not the temple in Jerusalem but out in the hills at a baby shower for a barren woman and a virgin!

When Mary sings that God has scattered the proud and brought down the mighty while exalting those of humble estate, this is what she is talking about! God use the small, despised, little forgotten things to upend the big, proud, rich leaders and rulers. God specializes in the unexpected. He loves turning your expectations upside down. He who is mighty does great things through your weakness, and turns your biggest trials into His greatest triumphs. This is God's special glory, showing His strength in your weakness and exalting those of humble estate.

And Christmas is one of the greatest displays of this special glory: God comes as a baby, born to a young nobody in a nowhere town, and that's His plan for saving the world. And as a result, every year at Christmastime, millions of Christians fill the air with songs about the little town of Bethlehem, the humble virgin Mary, and the baby who became the king of kings and lord of lords.

Our texts today are all variations on this theme: in Micah, we see the big ruler from the little town. In Mary's *Magnificat*, our Call to Worship, we hear about the proud being scattered and the humble exalted. In Hebrews 10, the author contrasts sacrifices and offerings with Jesus being given a body in which to do God's will, and in Mary's visit to Elizabeth, we see the Holy Spirit giving more spiritual insight to these women and the babies in their womb than all the Pharisees and temple priests put together.

So let's look a little closer at each one in turn. In Micah's prophecy, we hear hints of Gideon, who said much the same thing about his small clan, and yet God used him to deliver Israel. Micah

calls him a shepherd, and so we can't miss the echoes of Moses and David, shepherds who became mighty rulers over God's people, gaining an international reputation for Israel and her God, and bringing her to a time of peace.

The town of Bethlehem is where Jacob's wife Rachel was buried, where Ruth met Boaz, and where Jesse had a son named David. Look to little Bethlehem, Micah says, that's where the king will come from. And when wise men came from the ends of the earth to worship the newborn king, this is the verse that Herod's scribes remembered. Proud Herod trembled to hear it, and tried to kill him, but all the murderous might of Jerusalem couldn't defeat the little baby from little Bethlehem.

Little Bethlehem teaches us not put our trust is what is big and impressive and powerful. Not big government, not big military, not the big city, not a big bank balance. God brings big grace out of a little place. So take your eyes off of the big, and look for God to bring greatness out of what seems small.

Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55 transposes this same truth into the key of praise. Don't just adjust your expectations according to God's pattern; magnify God and rejoice in what He does! Because God exalts the humble, He will not overlook you! Even if you are poor and lowly and weak, even though you don't have much to offer God, God still has blessings for you!

So every time you are tempted to think that God doesn't care about little old you and your little old problems, or that He has more important things to do, or that you have racked up enough holiness points to get His attention, start singing Mary's song to your soul. Remember that God looks on those of humble estate and saves them. God's blessings are given not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of mercy – He remembers the mercy that He promised to Abraham, and shows that mercy to all who share Abraham's faith. Mary shows us that God doesn't help us because of who we are; God helps us because of who He is: a merciful God who opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Our passage from Hebrews is a little more indirect, but it still makes the same point: the work of sacrifice in Israel was a huge ordeal: Back in Israel's history, when God wanted to sanctify the world, He drowned the whole thing in a flood. That's what it took to wash the world clean.

When He wanted His people to be cleansed for one year, He appointed priests to offer sacrifices, and in preparation for the temple, King David had appointed 24,000 men to the work of the Lord's house. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of animals were slain; millions of gallons of blood poured out before the Lord every year.

So if you told an Israelite that God was going to deal with sin once for all for the entire world, what do you think that Israelite would have expected? A deeper cleansing than a worldwide flood? Greater and more effectual sacrifices than those at the temple? You would need an entire army of priests and all the animals in the world to deal with sin once and for all!

But when Jesus came, He didn't bring thousands of animals to thousands of priests. God prepared a body for Him in Mary's womb, and that's all He needed to complete the work of sacrificial atonement forever. All it took was one man doing the will of God by offering his body to take away the sins of the world

Not sacrifices; a body. Sacrifices are what you need when you have *failed* to do God's will. God gave Jesus a body so that He would be able to do God's will. The whole Bible bears witness to the fact that our attempts to do God's will cannot sanctify us, because we are sinners who keep missing the mark. But Hebrews surprises us by teaching that even the sacrifices that God required in His law don't sanctify. What God desires is obedience. He wants us to do His will, and to obey is better than sacrifice. But since we can't obey in our own strength, sacrifice is the best we can do.

But when Christ came into the world in the body that God prepared for Him, He came to do God's will, and God's will for Jesus was that He offer His body as a once for all offering to sanctify God's people. This means that you are sanctified by faith in Jesus. So don't try to come *alongside* Jesus and offer your own sacrifices; God doesn't want 'em! Come *through* Jesus, trusting that God has accepted His sacrifice in your place.

And now let's talk about that baby shower. I keep using that phrase, which maybe isn't technically accurate, in order to emphasize just how normal and everyday it was. It wasn't atonement day. It wasn't a special season of holiness. It was just pregnant women doing what pregnant women do. God shows up in the ordinary! His Spirit moves powerfully in what we

sometimes overlook as mundane. But your most powerful experience of the Holy Spirit's presence might not happen at church, or at Bible study, or anywhere you might expect.

Think of the conclusion to the *Lord of the Rings*. Really, the whole story is a fictional retelling of the theme of these verses: the mighty thrown down and the humble exalted. But at the key moment, evil Sauron is distracted by a frontal attack on his gates, when all the while the real victory is being won by a couple of nobodies somewhere else.

That's what's happening when Mary and Elizabeth meet up in the hill country. Satan had had huge success corrupting Judah's kings and rulers, as well as her temple and the priests in Jerusalem. But while he was focused on Israel's stronghold, the Holy Spirit was doing His great work at the baby shower of a barren woman and a virgin. God used two faithful, Spirit-filled moms to overthrow Satan's kingdom, because they believed that God would fulfill His word. That's the power of faith! You don't need power *and* faith; faith is enough! By faith, these women changed the world when they gave birth to the great prophet and to the Messiah.

Ladies, our world does not exalt and bless mothers. Mothering is at best one component of a fulfilling life, and a worst a distraction or an inconvenience. A baby shower is merely something cute; it doesn't threaten to turn the world upside down. But that's not how God thinks! God changes the world through the faith of a mother! And I know that your baby is not the Messiah, but a baby who is brought up to love and serve the Messiah is a glorious thing, and your children will rise up and called you blessed as you follow in Mary's footsteps. What the world sees as weak and humble, God uses to glorify Jesus and build His kingdom. So call Mary blessed, and imitate her faith!

This is what God does: He takes the weak and the small and the humble, and exalts them and blesses them through faith in Jesus. And since that is the case, the application is to humble ourselves and believe that God will fulfill His promises.

This means that we need to humble our priorities and our expectations. We should expend less energy seeking to become or influence the wealthy and the powerful, and we should spend more energy serving and loving the weak and needy. When God blesses Annapolis, it will have a lot more to do with the folks at Winter Relief than with those on State Circle.

We should give special attention to children and widows, not business professionals or community leaders. Baby showers are more important than power lunches. God gets more glory from the children's Sunday School classrooms in Annapolis than He does from the boardrooms of the biggest companies in Annapolis.

We should spend more time singing the *Magnificat* and rejoicing in our Savior than in striving and chasing success. God doesn't want any more blood sacrifices, and He doesn't want us to sacrifice our time and our energy and our bodies and our lives pursuing wealth and fame and power. Don't offer your body to those things; offer it up to do the will of God. And this is God's will for you: believe in the one He has sent, the one who offered up His body once for all to sanctify you.

Most of God's work looks like shepherds caring for sheep, babies kicking in their mothers' wombs, and ordinary people doing the will of God. That's the where, when, and who of God's great deeds. God takes humble people doing humble things in humbles places, and exalts them.

And all of this adds up to the ultimate way that God scatters the proud and exalts the humble: God's blessing doesn't come to the righteous; it comes to the wretched. Salvation doesn't come to the holy, it comes to the humble. We don't bring righteousness and holiness to God in order to receive salvation as a reward for obeying the best or offering the most sacrifices. We come with repentance and in humility, receiving His blessings by faith alone, as a gift of His grace.

Because it is always and only God's power that exalts the humble, there is no room for pride. There is no use for riches. All the power and might in the world cannot save us. In fact, we are *barren*, like Elizabeth, when it comes to righteousness. We are *virgins*, like Mary, when it comes to holiness.

But just like Mary and Elizabeth, God's blessing comes to us when we receive Christ by faith as the gracious gift of God through His Holy Spirit. God looks on your humility, and blesses you by filling you with Christ. And so blessed are you who believe that Christ has fulfilled what the Lord has spoken.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*