

**No! to Shame; Yes! to Salvation**  
**based on Luke 1:24-67 and Matthew 1:18-25, David Jahnke, 12/21/14**

Christmas and New Year's are around the corner. What a blessing it is to hang out with family, exchange gifts and celebrate. But maybe God has more in store for us. Maybe God wants us to find more meaning and joy through a greater involvement in His saving work in the world.

A friend of mine posted this the other day, "All I want for Christmas is the abolition of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchy." I commented about how much this warmed my heart. And my friend replied that Christmas was not primarily about warming my heart. It's also not about feeling shame for being a white, heterosexual, middle class American man. Nor is it about abolishing the Law which Jesus said he came to fulfill, no abolish.

Now he also came to overturn all evil powers and principalities. Mary's song praised God for bringing down the proud rulers from their thrones and lifting up the humble. **53** for filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. And this heralded both John the Baptist's and Jesus' challenging the authorities of their day to break down unjust principals that exclude and impoverish and shame or otherwise oppress.

All of the characters had or were about to suffer from these powers. Mary was pregnant without being married; a crime that would have led to lifelong shame and ostracism, if not early death by an angry stoning mob. Joseph was forced into the rumor mill of accepting this woman and child and would soon be exiled to Egypt because of a tyrant. Elizabeth and Zechariah were married for probably 20 years without ever getting pregnant, which, was wrongly a source of shame as well.

But Mary and Joseph humbly accepted God's call to both bear with and battle the injustices of society and this teaches us to do the same. And this brings with it a fair amount of sadness because we are connected to the pain and injustice that the lowly suffer. At Jesus' circumcision, Mary was told that a sword would pierce Mary's soul because of what Jesus would have to go through.

But I read a fitting quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson who said, "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, honorable, compassionate; to have it make a difference that you have lived and lived well."

Much of the modern world tells us that life is about personal happiness. And the world tells us that means getting what we want; what we quote-unquote “deserve.” Advertisers build on this deception in order to get us to buy their products, especially at this time of the year. And this works on both our shame and our pride. Playing on our shame goes like this-- “You, as you are, are not quite enough. You need this and that in order to be happy and complete.” And working on our pride, they tell us that we are like a god; that we deserve this and that and there is something wrong if we do not get it.

Now buying, giving and receiving things is meant to bring happiness but when it is not connected to eternity, the pleasure is transient; it is like a drug. The Christmas morning dismissal of one gift in order to get to the next one reflects this quite well.

Here’s the deal. We do not need any of it to make us complete. We are children of God who have already been completed by the love and mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

This is at work when Mary enters Elizabeth’s home. Nothing is given or received other than the gift of the Christ child. As soon as Mary enters Elizabeth’s home, Elizabeth exclaims, “Who am I that the mother of my Lord would come see me?” Does Elizabeth deserve this? Goodness no... But she has no shame at the presence of her Lord. She is filled to overflowing with joy as the baby within her reminds her that her shame has been taken away.

She and Zechariah in fact should have never let society shame them because God made them the way they were; he always loved them as they were and had something special in store for them.

And the same goes for all of you. The Spirit has conceived greatness deep within all of you and that greatness wants to leap for joy at the coming of Christ; His presence in your homes at Christmas; and whenever Christ greets you in the humble and the lowly out in the world.

I saw a mentally ill man who often mumbles and talks to himself at the YMCA. And it is hard and awkward and sad. But I felt this urge to say to him, “Merry Christmas brother!” And he smiled and said, “Thank you.” I should have said more but I think this little exchange brought just a little joy to us both.

I read a revised saying of Gandhi's, "The happiest people I know are those who lose themselves in the service of others." [Gordon Hinckley] And a Nobel Prize winning Bengali poet named Tagore wrote, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." — **Rabindranath Tagore**

We can turn to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 to get a radical look at happiness or blessedness. The word translated blessed time and again there more commonly means happy in the Greek. To be blessed by God is to be happy. Blessed or happy are the poor; blessed are the meek; blessed are the persecuted; blessed are those who hunger for righteousness in this world. If Jesus says they are blessed then we better get with them to find his joy.

On the way here today, I learned about a Jesuit priest who started a college preparatory school for the poor in Houston. He died at 44 a few weeks after years of battling stomach cancer. And his good friend remembered how he remained a sincerely joyful person until the end. And his friend said that was because joy is not about circumstances or getting what we want, it is about a relationship with God.

Let us find the joy of this season and greater joy in the New Year by knowing and growing our power to save and be saved by the lowly. For Christ comes to us in the meek, the hungry, the cold and the poor. With them, let us give and receive the one gift that makes all the difference in the world—the Christ child through whom all things were made and redeemed. And God's people say...

Four people were