



The Dignity of Responsibility

Luke 1:39-56

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Well, great to see you here. Thank you for being here. And those of you joining us online, I just love worship. Like, worship is so helpful for recalibrating, you know? And when we're together in a room, and you can feel the Holy Spirit moving, it's just awesome. I love our modern worship songs that we sing, and I love the hymns because those hymns, man, they're just familiar but powerful.

So, thanks for being here, and Merry Christmas. When I was a kid, growing up in Eastern Washington, my grandparents were farmers. They grew wheat and raised cattle. I spent a lot of time on the farm with my cousins, and my older cousin helped with the harvest. He got to drive the combine, which made him kind of big man on campus, and so he got to boss all of us other cousins around, which irritated us. We were always like, "I can't wait till I'm old enough to drive the combine, then I'm gonna boss all my cousins around!"

It was a big day in my life when I was nine years old, and my grandfather asked me to take the riding mower and mow the pasture that had overgrown. I was super excited because I saw driving the riding mower as a stepping stone to driving the combine. So I was super excited until I drove the riding mower up over a tree stump and somehow got it stuck there. I couldn't get it off. Then I heard my grandfather calling my name by his favorite term of endearment for me—"nothead." Except there was a colorful Eastern Washington adjective that came before the word "nothead."

Now, for those of you who don't speak Eastern Washington, that's how we say "I love you," okay? So I felt very loved and embraced by that. He got the mower off the tree stump, and then he said something very important: "Finish the job." He didn't say, "You screwed up. That's it, I can't trust you anymore." He said, "Finish the job."

In the words of the founder of International Justice Mission, Gary Haugen, he gave me the dignity of responsibility. Do you remember when someone first gave you the dignity of responsibility, asked you to do an important job that made you feel like you had something to offer? Because God gives all of us the dignity of responsibility. All the important things God wants done in the world—people knowing Jesus and being changed by His love, the poor being empowered out of poverty, the chains of injustice being shattered, people who are lonely finding community—God wants to do all of that not just for us, but with us and through us.

And we see this all over the Christmas story in the Bible. Last week, we looked at the Christmas story, how it begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are way past childbearing years, but God allows them to miraculously conceive. They have a son who grows up to be John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus. The very next story after that one is when an angel appears to Mary and tells her that, even though she's a virgin, she's going to miraculously conceive, and that her son will be Jesus, who will save the world.

The angel says, "Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, for no word from God will ever fail." At that time, Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. The word there in the original Greek means the baby danced energetically. So, it's not a Presbyterian baby; it's a Pentecostal baby. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and, in a loud voice, exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her."

We're doing a sermon series on the questions people ask in the Christmas story in the Bible. I want you to notice the word "favored" in the question Elizabeth asks: "Why am I so favored?" "Why am I so blessed?" "Why am I so fortunate that I get to be a part of God's salvation plan for the world?" Notice what she doesn't say. She doesn't say, "Oh, this is such an imposition. Right at Christmas. As if I don't have enough to do—birthing the prophet who's going to announce the Messiah. Now my cousin Mary comes as a house guest. I don't have time for this. When am I going to get my Christmas shopping done?"

She doesn't say that. She doesn't see it as a "have to." She sees it as a "get to." Not as an obligation, but as a privilege. God gives her and Mary the dignity of responsibility by making them part of His salvation plan. But it's not just them. God invites all of us to participate in what He's doing in the world. The Bible says, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

So many of you are doing these kinds of things. You're volunteering in all kinds of places, partnering with Jesus to bring His kingdom, to make this world more like His heaven. And

if you're one of those people, this sermon isn't "you gotta do more." This sermon is "well done." Because this is what disciples do—we partner with Jesus to heal the world.

So, well done. My prayer is that none of us hear out of these verses a sense of duty and obligation, or as if it's one more thing to do. Instead, I hope we feel the way I felt when my grandfather asked me to mow that pasture—the privilege, the honor of being invited by God into what He's doing in the world. It's one of the highest compliments God gives us: that He doesn't want to do it for us, He wants to do this with us and through us because He loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

One of the best ways to build a relationship with someone is to work side by side with them, right? We've all experienced that. When you work side by side with someone, you get to know them really well, and it builds relationship. When my grandfather asked me to mow that pasture, I felt closer to him because suddenly I was working side by side with him to run the farm. And when we partner with Jesus to make all things new, we get closer to Him, and we see His power released through us.

He gives us the dignity of responsibility in a couple of ways. First, He gives us the dignity of responsibility for spreading the good news of Jesus—that God Himself has come in the person of Jesus at Christmas. He died on a cross to pay the price for our sins, was raised from the dead, and if we know Him, we'll be raised from the dead as well. He has already begun His mission to make all things new, and He wants us to be part of it with Him.

When Elizabeth asks, "Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" the word "Lord" means God. Elizabeth gets to be the first person in history to proclaim that Jesus is God. She gets to be the first person to proclaim the gospel—the good news of Jesus. And that's what He gives to all of us. Jesus said to all of us, "Go make disciples of all nations."

A really easy way to do that this month is to simply invite someone to join you for Christmas Eve to hear the good news of Jesus. People are more open to coming at Christmas time. Invite someone who doesn't go to church to come with you on Christmas Eve. We have ten different services this year and four different kinds of music, so there are lots of options to choose from. It's like a buffet of Christmas potpourri, right?

The reason we have so many services is so there's no overflow. We want everyone to have a seat, to feel welcome, and to feel like they belong. If you can, and if it's possible, you could help us have enough room by going to one of the lesser-attended services. These would be, if you're in the sanctuary, 3, 9, or 11 AM, which aren't as attended, or Modern at 7, 9, or 10:30 AM, or African Praise at 2 PM. It's a chance to make room for people who don't normally come to church and to hear the good news of Jesus.

Also, if you can, I'd like to invite you to help us welcome people—be an usher, be a greeter, or a parking lot host. Because here's the thing: if someone has a bad experience

in the parking lot, they might not be as open to hearing about Jesus. They'll come in all grumpy and moody, and then we sing at them and I preach at them, and they're like, "This... right?" The parking lot is a more important job than mine on Christmas Eve.

Seriously, maybe I should go out there and one of you should preach. No? Okay, then sign up to be in the parking lot to welcome people and invite someone. Even if they say no, you've still been a co-worker with God in sharing His good news, and you'll survive the experience of being told no. A couple of years ago, I was talking with a mechanic who was working on my car, and the conversation was going really well. So I said, "Hey, would you like to come to my church for Christmas Eve?" And he said, "No, I'd hate that." I was like, "Okay, just asking." The point is, I survived the experience.

It was not traumatizing to be told no. And we kept talking about the car after that. Invite someone. There are people in this church whose journey with Jesus began because someone invited them to Christmas Eve. Be that person. God gives us the dignity of responsibility to spread his good news.

Also, responsibility for each other. The reason the angel tells Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy is because Mary cannot fulfill her mission by herself. She is miraculously conceived. When she's a virgin, before she's married, she is going to face a mountain of stigma. And so she goes to Elizabeth, who says to Mary, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her." Elizabeth is affirming Mary's faith, affirming her courage, strengthening Mary for what she's going to have to face, because Mary is going to need to be very, very brave. And Elizabeth puts courage into her. It's called community.

None of us can do this life alone. We need each other's support. God gives us the dignity of responsibility to spread his good news, responsibility for each other.

And finally, responsibility to heal the world through Jesus' power. Not our power, Jesus' power. Immediately after Elizabeth gets done talking, Mary, in the next verse, starts to sing a song. And she says this: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. His mercy extends to those who fear him for generation to generation." In other words, Jesus is coming to bring mercy and grace and love.

"He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble." Part of what that means is that it means healing unjust systems that rulers have put into place, shattering chains of injustice. "He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty." That's about the elimination of poverty. So her song makes it clear that Jesus is coming to heal the world and make it more like his heaven.

Elizabeth gets to be part of that by having and raising John the Baptist, who prepares people for Jesus. Mary gets to be a part of that by having and raising Jesus, who will

save the world. What a privilege. God entrusts his entire salvation plan into the hands of these two women who joyfully receive it. And he invites all of us to be part of that as well.

There are lots of ways that we can be part of healing the world. Again, as so many of you are already doing, and well done. We can do that simply by listening to someone who's hurting— a coworker, a friend, a fellow student— just listening to them and showing compassion to them. We empower the poor out of poverty by volunteering at places like Jubilee Reach or Auto Angels. We bring justice by fixing things in our office or our schools or our nation where people of color, older people, or other people aren't being treated fairly.

We can be part of a good neighbor team to welcome refugees who have fled their country with nothing but the clothes they're wearing and welcome them in Jesus' name. Or it may not be some new thing that God wants to add to your schedule. It may be something you're already doing, but to do it more intentionally with him and through his power to bring healing where you live, work, play, or learn. Lots of ways to be part of God's rescue mission.

Now, some of you may be thinking, "I don't know how to do that. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I may say the wrong thing. I may screw it up." Well, you probably will. I mean, I have 100% confidence in your ability to screw it up. You know why? Because I screw it up. We all screw it up. Here's the good news: When God put a call on your life, he already factored in your incompetence. That's the best news you're going to hear all week. It's baked into the plan. We're going to screw up and he still wants you and he still wants me to be part of it because he wants a relationship with us. And he can use even our mistakes for his purposes.

My grandfather did not ask me to mow the pasture because he had no other alternative than a nine-year-old kid who not only might but did screw it up. No, no, no. I mean, he could have asked my older "mister big shot, I get to drive the combine" cousin to do it. But he asked me because he loved me. And he wanted me to join him in running the farm. He was also developing skills in me so that I could take on even more. And when I screwed it up, he didn't say, "That's it, you're done." He just said, "Finish the job." He didn't lose faith in me.

Well, then, pastor, how do I know what God is asking me to do? I am so glad you asked that question. Because starting January 5th, we're going to begin a sermon series on how to discern God's will in our personal lives. How do we hear God's will? How do we discern that? We'll start that series in January, but also together as a church.

There are a lot of resources in this church, not just of money— that too— but also of time, talent, and influence. The ways we're connected in government, education, medicine, or law. And if you remember back in October on Vision Sunday, I mentioned that a year from now, our church turns 70 years old. I also mentioned in October, Vision Sunday, that what if by then, 70% of us were giving at minimum 10% of our money, our time, and

our influence? That would be a lot more resources than we have right now. And that would enable us as a church to fix, if not outright fix, many of the problems in our region, as well as the places in the world that God sends us, through Jesus' power, not ours.

So what would God want to do with all those resources? Our elders and pastors are discerning and praying about that right now. One of the ways we discern things, one of the ways we know what God is calling us to do, individually and corporately as a church, is through prayer and fasting. Not as a legalistic obligation, but because for 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have experienced that when we fast and when that's coupled with prayer, it gets us closer to God and we can hear from him more clearly.

So starting January 1st, we are inviting all of us to enter into 25 days of prayer and fasting. And there are two ways you could do this. For the first 25 days of January, you could pick one day a week— say Wednesdays or Fridays— where you're going to fast until 6 p.m. The biblical norm is to fast from food, but if you can't do that for health reasons or other reasons, fast from something else like electronics or busyness, and then devote extra time to prayer in those 25 days. So you can fast once a week for those first 25 days, or if you want, you can fast every day until 6 p.m. for 25 days. And again, add prayer to that, whatever you feel God leading you to.

The reason we do this is not out of legalism, it's not to get God to approve of us, it's not so that we can feel like we're better Christians than someone else, it helps us grow as disciples. A disciple is someone who is learning to be like Jesus. And to do that, we have to do the things that Jesus did. And he did a lot of prayer and fasting, as have his followers for 2,000 years, because it helps us hear from God better.

This will all culminate on January 25th, where we're going to have a day of discernment, where we're going to invite all of you to come in person and give your input about where God would be taking us as a church. If 70% of us were giving 10% of our time, our influence, and our money, we'll invite you on January 25th to come in person and give input about where God might want to use all those resources.

So 25 days of prayer and fasting leading to January 25th, 2025. See what we did there? Oh yeah, we're good in this church, we're so clever. And everyone can come on January 25th to give your input, but we do ask that if you come on January 25th, you've spent some time beforehand in prayer and fasting. We want to hear from God on this. Not just what we think, but we want to hear what God thinks.

And if you don't plan to attend January 25th, that's fine, we know lots of you won't, but you're still part of this. So please still do the 25 days of prayer and fasting for yourself, to hear from God for yourself, but also pray for our leadership as we discern where God is calling us as a church.

There are lots of details, and we're going to send out an email to you with a video after Christmas that gives some more of these details. So this is just kind of a get ready action step, and the details will follow.

The main point here is that God honors us. He blesses us. We are privileged to be invited into what he's doing in the world. I got an email from a woman in our church who, after a sermon where the action step was, "Ask God to tell you where he wants to use you in his healing," said God answered that prayer within an hour.

She wrote: "I knew I needed to invite my neighbors over for dinner once a month. So after running it by my husband, I contacted a lot of our neighbors to invite them over for a simple meal the second Tuesday of every month. That was 2019, and they are still doing it every month. It's amazing what God, through these dinners, has done with our neighborhood. Before the dinners, neighbors didn't really know each other, but now we've become a family. People stop and have real conversations, no longer just a quick hello and goodbye. We share chainsaws and tools instead of buying them, and that builds even more community."

"We are not embarrassed to be caught outside in our pajamas. When the power goes out— ooh, that's close to home, isn't it? When the power goes out, everyone is gathered several times at the house, at the one house with the generator. When we held a dinner in the front yard during summer, an autistic man stopped in and, after a good time, went back home to get his dad. When his dad wouldn't come back with him, he returned by himself. Now he sometimes says hello as he walks by. For an autistic person, that's a big step toward greater independence."

Two of the families are also Christian. They've joined us in praying for and sharing the love of God with our neighbors. All of our neighbors know that my husband and I are Christians, and we talk about it. I've had a lot of questions and discussions with neighbors about Jesus.

And then just this week, they got two notes from neighbors. One said, "I can't thank you enough for these dinners. It's built such a sense of community, it's invaluable." The other note said, "Thank you for bringing our neighborhood together. It's made our lives that much better."

She said, "My husband and I just keep it simple. We don't do potluck, because if they have to bring something, that's a barrier for people to come. So we just make an easy pasta dish, tacos, sloppy joes. Neighbors don't need things to be fancy, with a theme and centerpieces and matching silverware."

Are you hearing this, Eastsiders? Are you hearing this? Are you listening to this wisdom from this person? They also don't want a stressed-out host. Just relax and enjoy your neighbors.

Through prayer, they discern that God was calling them, giving them the dignity of responsibility to share the good news of Jesus by talking about him with their neighbors. The dignity of responsibility to create community in their neighborhood and to heal the world through Jesus' power.

Because every expert will tell you that there is an epidemic of loneliness in our culture. That in a few short years, we have gone from having most of our interactions in person to now it's all online, even at church, and it's killing us. We weren't designed for this. And it's causing a spike in anxiety, depression, and stress-related illnesses—not to mention our toxically divided culture.

God is using this couple to bring healing to their neighborhood, and I've talked to them—my wife and I have talked to them. When they talk about this, it's not like they go, "We have to do this thing once a month." No, they light up. And then they start to talk about all the things they've seen God do through these dinners, and they just light up because they realize God's power is flowing through them to heal an entire neighborhood. And that is a really cool thing to be part of.

Now, God may tell you to do something similar, or something different, or to keep doing the thing you're already doing or maybe do something you're already doing differently with more intention around partnering with Jesus to bring healing. But he wants to get closer to you by working side by side with you to heal the world.

You know, people who aren't Christians are pretty much fed up and disgusted with churches. They've just about had it with us—all of our yelling, all of our anger. A lot of people inside churches are disillusioned and discouraged, but man, Jesus, I mean, Jesus is just so amazing. And we have this grand and glorious call to help people discover how amazing Jesus is, to be changed by his love, and then together heal what is broken through his power in our world. And that is a huge privilege.

And why are we so favored? Why are we so fortunate? Why are we so blessed that our Lord comes to each of us in person and says, "I want you to help me with this. Side by side, you and me, let's heal the world together." What an honor. It's not a have-to, it's a get-to.

So Jesus, thank you that we get to do this. Thank you that you trust us enough to invite us into what you're doing. And so, Lord, help us to hear from you, whether it's well done, keep going, or something new you want us to step into. Jesus, help us to hear from you how you want to use us in your world, how you want us to go out there and proclaim the good news—that you have come, that you are with us, that you love us. How do you want to use us?

Lord, help us to hear that and step into it. And then, Lord, help us, give us eyes to see all the things you do through us and all the ways you're changing the world so that the world will know just how amazing you are, Jesus. In your name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In your own words, what does Mary say Jesus does in her song (v. 46-56)?
- Why do you think Mary went to Elizabeth's house? Why stay for three months?
- What things did Mary and Elizabeth do that are important to you and why are they important to you?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.