The Gift of a New Understanding

In the series; “Gifts of Grace.”

# Scripture: Luke 1:39-56

# Key Thought: Jesus brought us a new understanding of God and of ourselves.

# Intro:

James W Moore, in his book, All I Want for Christmas, writes about a time when his family was invited to a unique birthday party. A close friend had invited his family and about 10 or 12 other people to attend a birthday party for the friend’s wife. Rev. Moore writes, “We were all told rather strongly not to bring gifts and the invitation repeated the message in big bold letters, ‘No Gifts Please’ with two exclamation points.” Rev. Moore continues”

“We had a delightful evening; a sumptuous meal, excellent entertainment, delightful conversation, good fun, and fellowship. Finally, the cake was brought in and we all sang “Happy Birthday.” But then something happened at this birthday party that I had never seen before. The man stood up and with a wide smile, he said: “My wife, Diana, celebrates her birthday in a unique way. Instead of receiving gifts from others, she likes to celebrate her birthday by giving gifts to those she loves.” Diana then proceeded to bring out special gifts for all the people there.”

Well something like this happens at Christmas. It’s the day we celebrate Jesus’ birthday, yet in a real sense, it is us we have already received so many “Gifts of Grace.” Jesus came to earth to make possible all the Gifts of Grace that God has showered upon us through the birth and life and death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

They are not material gifts that can be wrapped like we give to one another, but they are infinitely more valuable. Today I want us to think about another one of those gifts. It is the gift of a new understanding. Jesus came in order that we as a race might receive the gift of a new understanding of who God was and a new picture of who we are and how we should relate to one another.

# A new understanding of God

One of the tactics that is good to use in Bible study when studying a passage is to ask ourselves what we can learn about God from that particular passage. One of the overall purposes of the Bible as a whole is to serve as a vehicle through which God reveals himself to us. Often, we just fall back on our general knowledge of God from other places in the Bible, rather than looking at the specific passage we are studying and trying to find out exactly what it is teaching us about God. So, let’s begin this morning by looking at the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth and the beautiful song of Mary and see what we can learn that helps us to understand God better. Of course, Jesus and his coming, taught us many more things about God that these, but what we can learn right here will help us get started.

## God is a promise keeper

A few years ago, there was a Christian men’s movement called Promise-Keepers. I liked the premise behind the movement which was that Christian men should be people who keep their promises to their families, and their business associates and in the personal lives. And the underlying reason why we should keep our promises is because God has revealed himself to be a promise keeper. There are a few passages more to the point than the first chapter of Luke.

As the passage we read today begins, Elizabeth, the relative that Mary is visiting, is pregnant as a result of a promise from God to her husband Zechariah. If you recall the story, both Elizabeth and Zachariah were past the normal age of childbearing. They had no children and had given up on it. Zechariah was a priest and while he was on duty at the temple, he had seen an angel who had promised him that God was going to send him a son; his wife Elizabeth would conceive, and Zachariah was to give the boy the name, John. You recall in the story, that Zechariah was so doubtful, that the angel announced that Zechariah would not be able to speak until the promise came to pass. And indeed, Zechariah could not speak until the time that he wrote on the tablet that his infant son’s name would be John.

God kept his promise to Zechariah. So, it is no co-incidence that Elizabeth opens her conversation with Mary in Luke 1:45 with a reference to Mary’s trust in the promise-keeping nature of God.

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

Mary in turn, references God’s faithful promise-keeping as regards the nation of Israel.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.” Luke 1:54-55

The fact that God keeps his promises was not a new revelation. But after the prophetic voice had been silent in Israel for 400 years since the prophet Malachi, it was important to renew the message to us as a race that God keeps his Word.

This message would be amplified over and over as both Jesus and the Gospel writers connected the life and message to the prophet promises of the OT.

The promise-keeping nature of God is behind every prayer that we pray. God has promised to hear our prayers, unless we harbor deliberately unrepented sin. God has promised to never leave us or forsake us. As we are faithful stewards of his gifts to us, God promises to meet our every need. When we pray we depend upon the promises of God.

## God extends mercy

Another key word in Mary’s song is the word mercy. To be merciful means to extend kindness, forbearance and compassion beyond what might be expected or required by fairness. Mary’s point is that God has extended mercy by noticing the plight of his wayward people again. But what Mary did not understand was that God was extending a far greater mercy than she knew. He was not just noticing the plight of the Jewish people of Mary’s time. God was remembering the sinful condition of the entire human race and through Jesus extending a much greater mercy. Listen as Paul describes God’s initiative.

 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:3-8 NIV

Mary’s song of praise, which is often titled, “The Magnificat,” was more prophetic than she knew. Though Jesus, God was giving us a new window to understand the wideness of his mercy.

Paul had experienced this personally.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen 1 Tim 1:15-17

And when we come to Jesus, asking him to forgive our sins, when we open our hearts to his love and decide to become a Christ-follower, then we experience God’s mercy for ourselves. Whenever we do something we know was not right, and we repent, we are so thankful again for the mercy of God who as the Psalm says,

He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
Ps 103:10-12

So, the first thing Jesus came to do is to give us a new understanding or an new level of understanding about God.

# A new view of others

The second area where Jesus’ coming gives us a new understanding is in the area of human relationships.

In the passage that we read, Mary understands that the coming of Jesus would up and the spiritual order. The rich and powerful who had been ascendant, would be humbled. In the poor and oppressed who had been overlooked and neglected would be raised up. What Mary could not yet understand was how this would happen. It would come to pass through both the teachings of Jesus and the institution of the New Covenant which would replace the old one along with its traditions, laws and prejudices. One of the most powerful transforming forces would be Jesus teaching and examples of love.

## Jesus taught love

The world of Mary’s time, and unfortunately our us today as well, was very much divided into camps-- identities, ethnic groups, social stratifications and gender roles. Pretty much everything was determined by whether you were man or woman, Jewish or Roman, scribe or a carpenter or a shepherd, of the priestly tribe or not, etc. Between groups there was tension, even hatred.

So, it is in our own country. Racial prejudice causes one race to isolate itself from another. Political divisions spur words of hatred. And the economic gap becomes greater and greater in our own country.

Into this fall in mess of human relationships, Jesus came. He came with a counterintuitive and countercultural message of love. He crossed barriers with love. He gave a woman caught in adultery a second chance. He told about the Samaritan who went the 2nd mile to take care of and injured Jewish man. In that parable he created a paradigm which reverberates still in our language and law called. “A Good Samaritan.” On Good Samaritan is someone who goes the extra mile to show love and caring to someone in need that they don’t even know. Jesus told the disciples that they should be known by their love for each other. He even suggested that love should be so extreme that it was willing to sacrifice itself for the good of others. He shocked people by telling them to love even their enemies. This was a new vision of how the human race might get along. The apostle John glimpsed it and called the Christian church to continue Jesus example and teaching.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.
1 John 4:7-12 NIV

## Mary as a servant

One of the key reasons we appreciate and admire Mary so much as a spiritual person, is her dedication to God and her willingness out of that dedication to be a servant to the will of God under the most difficult of circumstances and assignments! The servanthood of Mary opens up a window to another example and teaching of her Son that continues to transform global human relationships today wherever we will listen to Jesus. Of himself, Jesus said,

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45 NIV

He expected us to learn from his example and put it into practice. So, he gave a radical command to his disciples. He mandated that they turn the dog-eat-dog culture around them upside down. He commanded that they behave differently from the “love-only-your-own-and-then-only-when-it-suits-you” ethic which we so often see even today. Instead, Jesus mandated clearly

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. Mark 10:42-44 NIV

Jesus came to give us a completely new perspective on what should be the driver in human relationships.

# A new purpose for living

## A new purpose for Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary

There is no doubt that the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth and of Mary and Joseph were radically changed by the messages they received as recorded in Luke chapter one and Matthew one; and by the births of the children who were born to them as part of the divine follow-through on those messages. The lives of each couple received a whole new purpose. In one sense, every couple who has a new child has a new purpose for living; they are now assigned by God to help that child grow up as a healthy and holy human being. But in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary, they each had an additional new purpose, to raise up a son whom they knew was especially called of God from before birth. It was for them a high calling and a life-changing purpose.

## We have new purpose in Jesus

One of the gifts that comes to all of us who are followers of Jesus is the gift of a new understanding of our purpose for living. One of the big questions of philosophers are always asking is this; Why are we here?

I think we would all agree that most of our world has little purpose in life. They do not know how to answer that question. They just live for the next good time. The less connected we are to other people as a society, the less purpose we show. And the society that we live in is becoming less and less connected despite their increased superficial online connections via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. What we need is a wholesome overriding purpose that guides our actions and our relationships, that gives direction to our days and helps us prioritize our choices. Some people get attached to purposes okay, but in the long run they proved to be inferior ones. People give their lives to a company, only to discover that the company gives them the boot when their contract got too expensive. Many have given their lives to a career, only to discover once they reached the pinnacle of all their dreams, it didn’t fill their souls and produce happiness as they thought it would. Something more was needed.

When Jesus spoke to his disciples about their future assignments, he gave them just such a purpose. He expressed it in various terms.

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Matt 28:19-20

In the upper room he told the disciples;

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” John 20:21

I like to express this as Jesus telling us that we individually and collectively are to be the continuing incarnation of himself in our world today! As he preached Good News and taught others to follow God, so are we to bring the Good News to those around us. As his presence and prayers brought healing and wholeness to those in need, so we should strive to bring healing and wholeness by our presence, our words, and our prayers. He lived a life full of grace. He spoke truth. He asks us to do the same. When we grasp that amazing life-changing purpose, we will never again be able to live simply for the next good time. We will never again be able to have mundane priorities. And, we will never need to feel purposeless, the matter our age or condition. As long as we can pray to God and interact with people in any way, we can be a part of spreading God’s love to others and interceding for those in need. God’s purpose through Jesus will bring meaning and direction to our lives. It’s part of the new understanding about us that Jesus came to bring.

## Who is blessed?

One of the fascinating studies in the Bible is to look at the list of verses that tell who it is that is described in the Scripture as blessed. There are many verses to consider in both the Old and New Testaments. For example:

Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord. Ps 89:15

Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him. Ps 128:1

Jesus also talked about who was blessed often. One of those sayings has particular relevance to the Christmas story.

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.”

 He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”
Luke 11:27-28

I don’t think he was saying that Mary was not blessed. Rather he was telling us why she was blessed and how we also can be blessed. Mary was not blessed simply for the physical acts of mothering but rather for the obedience she had given to the divine assignment and purpose that came to her in the angel announcement. It had involved mothering but the cause was deeper. It had to do with Mary’s heart of commitment to God.

When teaching his disciples about servanthood and loving others Jesus said,

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. John 13:14-17

A saying of Jesus that is especially appropriate for Christmas time in the USA, was relayed to us by the Apostle Paul. Paul writes:

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Acts 20:35

So why do I point these out? Because it become obvious as we review them that purpose and blessedness go together. Our spiritual fulfillment, our sense of wholeness has everything to do with our fulfilling the purposes for which God has made us. As long as we are serving only ourselves, we will never find the happiness and fulfillment that we seek. Does that mean we should all switch careers? Does that mean there is something wrong with making money or having a good time? Absolutely not as long as they are prioritized properly. We carry on the purposes for which God has made us – spreading Good News, caring for other people, as we go in this world. Are you a bus driver? Then be an incarnation of Jesus on your bus route. Are you an engineer or architect? Then allow the purposes of Jesus to inform your decisions, the kindness of Jesus to permeate your business relationships, and the integrity of Jesus to characterize your business choices. Are you in government? Look to the amazing balance of mercy and justice that Jesus had to help you in your leadership. Are you a nurse? Draw on the love of Jesus to care for unloving and trying patients, for Jesus tells us that whatever we have done to serve the least of these will be considered as done for him on the day when He calls us to account.

Jesus came to give us a new understanding that completely transforms our living.

## Conclusion:

I close with a story which James W. Moore tells from his own childhood (p. 39). It illustrates the point so well about how we so need God’s gift of a new understanding.