

McCabe United Methodist Church
Advent & Christmas 2015: “Cross My Heart”
A Promise That Turns the World Upside-Down
Sermon on Luke 1:26-56 (12/19 & 12/20/15)
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As many of you are likely aware, this last week was a big week for *Star Wars* fans because the newest movie in the franchise was released. This movie was much-anticipated because, until a few years ago, George Lucas, the film series' creator, said there would be no more *Star Wars* films.

Six movies had been released from 1977-2005 and that was supposedly going to be it – despite the longing and the sincere hope for more by *Star Wars* fans across the globe. And, on Thursday, that longing and hope was satisfied as *Star Wars Episode 7: The Force Awakens* was released.

People waited in line for hours and hours, days ahead of time, to get opening day tickets to this movie...and shows quickly sold out for it throughout this weekend.

Star Wars mania is a fascinating cultural phenomenon and it crosses all sorts of lines because people of all ages, races, educational and cultural backgrounds are drawn to it. Many Christians also find themselves drawn to it, in part, because of “The Force,” which is an integral focus of each *Star Wars* film.

Wikipedia describes the Force as “a binding, metaphysical, ubiquitous power.”¹ In the fictional world of *Star Wars*, the Force is a *real* – though mysterious – power that's everywhere and can be harnessed and used either for good or for evil.

Christians over the years have often made comparisons between the Force and God...though, Christians making such comparisons would be quick to say that the good use of the Force is like God, while the evil use of the Force would fall in line with the devil, or with whatever understanding you have when it comes to evil, spiritual powers.

Years ago, in a seminary class, one of my professors shared that, while he loves *Star Wars*, and while he appreciates and enjoys comparisons between *Star Wars* and Christianity, we need to be clear on one very important thing:

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Force_\(Star_Wars\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Force_(Star_Wars))

in *Star Wars*, the Force has equal potential to be used for good *or* evil. And we just don't believe that. We *can't* believe that.

As Christians, we believe the spiritual forces of good far outweigh the spiritual forces of evil. We believe this no matter what's happening in our lives or in our world – and we *must* believe this...perhaps especially when we may think evil is beginning to win.

In our culture, we get trained to be afraid all the time.

When I think back on my own life, it seems there's always been *something* to be afraid of. The same is true when I think about the history I've learned – of our own country and of other parts of the world.

There has always been *something* to be afraid of. Always.

Which is probably why the command most frequently uttered by God and angels throughout the Bible is the command, “Do not be afraid” or “fear not.” In fact, we heard it early in today's reading when the angel Gabriel showed up before Mary: “Do not be afraid,” Gabriel said to her. “God is pleased with you.”

Surely Gabriel said this because, when an angel shows up, it's definitely confusing and probably a bit terrifying. Surely the angel wanted to put young Mary at ease. But I suspect Gabriel also told Mary not to be afraid because he knew she would encounter much worth fearing – for herself and for the promised child she was about to bear.

Some 30 years down the road, Mary would find herself a middle-aged woman with a son whose teachings about God's mercy, and whose challenges about loving our enemies, would cause religious and political leaders to plot against him.

Some 30 years down the road, Mary would find herself a witness as crowds of people shouted for her precious son's execution.

Some 30 years down the road, Mary would find herself at the foot of a cross, her son hanging there ...dying. His friends will have abandoned him for fear they would be arrested – for fear they, too, might be sentenced to the same death her son was experiencing.

“Don't be afraid,” Gabriel said to Mary. “The Lord is pleased with you.”

Mary would need that command and that blessing from that day forward.

And it seems that somehow Mary knew something of what was to come.

Just think about what she proclaimed when she and Elizabeth greeted each other – both of them in the midst of miraculous pregnancies... Mary's because she was a young virgin, Elizabeth's because she was biologically beyond her child-bearing years.

The “song” at the end of today's Scripture reading is often referred to as “The Magnificat” because, in many translations of it, Mary begins by saying, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Magnificat is Latin for “magnifies.” And in her song, Mary proclaimed that she knew something of what God was up to as Jesus grew in her womb. Hear again what she said:

“With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior. He cares for me, his humble servant. From now on, all people will say God has blessed me. God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy. He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.

“The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. He drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power. God gives the hungry good things to eat, and sends the rich away with nothing. He helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people. The Lord made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his family forever!”

Mary was a virgin, teenaged girl from a tiny town...and she belonged to a group of people who had constantly been invaded and overthrown by larger, more powerful nations.

She *knew* that, in making her the bearer of God's Son, God was showing a kind of humble power and quiet strength the world wouldn't know what to do with.

When the angel Gabriel came to announce that she would be the mother of God's Son, Mary knew that somehow, in some mysterious way, God was turning the world upside-down. Because worldly strength doesn't usually look like a helpless baby born in a stable to a teenage, virgin girl in a tiny town in a powerless nation.

Worldly leaders sit at large desks in private offices in beautiful buildings in capital cities.

But God's Son was born into this world far from all of that. God's Son teaches us there is power in humility...there is value in mercy and forgiveness. And when God's Son was shut down by worldly powers – when he was hung on a cross to die – God's response was something the world had never seen: *Resurrection.*

The promise of Advent, the promise of Christmas, and the promise of Christianity itself is that evil *will* never, and *can* never win out over divine good. Jesus' humble birth into this world and his glorious resurrection from the dead are signs of that promise.

“Do not be afraid,” God says to us. “I promise I will be with you and I will work for good through it all. *Cross my heart.*”

This is the promise we celebrate at Christmastime: God's promise to be present with us through it all...and God's promise to work for good no matter what.

In our lives and in our world.

Several years ago, United Methodist pastor and writer Mike Slaughter published a book called *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday!*

In this book, Mike Slaughter discusses the somewhat bizarre paradox of us Christians spending a lot of money on gifts for ourselves and for those in our closest circle of family and friends...as a way of celebrating the birth of our Savior, whose promised presence is for *everyone* – not just those we know and love the most.

So, since 2004, Mike Slaughter has encouraged the folks in his church to consider spending *half* what they planned to spend on Christmas presents for their friends and family...and giving the other half to their church's Christmas offering – which would go toward a chosen service project sponsored by their church.

In doing so, they would not only be giving themselves Christmas gifts, but they would also be giving Jesus a gift. (It is his birthday we celebrate on Christmas, after all.)

To date, this “Christmas Is Not Your Birthday” concept has raised nearly \$8 million for mission projects through the church where Mike Slaughter serves in Ginghamburg, Ohio. And, over the last 11 years, as word of this concept spread across the country, churches everywhere have begun giving away their own Christmas offerings as gifts to others...and, by extension, as gifts to Jesus.

Here at McCabe, for years there have been opportunities to give to others around Christmas.

Through the Shoebox Christmas project, the Open Door Blessing Tree, the Shepherd's Run we have sometimes coordinated, and now through our monthly One Thing mission, we try to provide various opportunities for folks to give to *others* around Christmas. But, for the first time, last year we actually gave away a pile of money – *as a church* – through our Christmas Eve offering.

Instead of keeping that offering and putting it into our General Fund to pay for salaries, programming, and building expenses – all good, important things, of course – we opted to give that money to three particular missions and non-profit organizations.

Last year, our first-ever McCabe Christmas Eve offering brought in nearly \$11,500 and I am hoping that, together, we can bring in even more than that this year. I decided to put \$ 300 toward this offering – in honor of our incredible staff here at McCabe – and I hope you will consider making a gift to our Christmas Eve offering as well.

It can be \$1, it can be \$1,000. Whatever you give toward our Christmas Eve offering will be a gift to others this Christmas – and a gift to others is always *also* a gift to Jesus Christ himself.

At a time of year when our culture encourages us to buy more, more, more for ourselves and for our closest loved ones, I just absolutely *love* the idea of blessing others at Christmas.

Cultural values of selfishness and of a focus on “me” and “mine” get turned upside-down when people look beyond themselves. And, to be perfectly honest, I think doing something to bless *others* is perhaps the best way to “keep Christ in Christmas,” as the popular phrase dictates.

After all, we believe Christ was born into this world to bless everyone through his life, his sacrificial death on the cross, and his glorious resurrection from the dead.

Giving to others this season is a way of living into the upside-down promise of Christmas: this promise that God's Son was born into the world by a working - class, virgin, teenage girl, in a tiny town outside the big, fancy Capital City, and laid in a manger. Power and strength don't usually look like that – but they sure do when God is involved.

My fiancé, Derrick, is one of the managers at a popular retail establishment here in Bismarck. This particular retail establishment is part of a large chain of stores that are found in many communities across the country. This particular company allows customers to place certain, gift-type items on layaway in the months leading up to Christmas.

When Derrick told me about this a couple of weeks ago, I thought it was kind of quaint, but a great thing for stores to do. With fairly easy access to credit, I suspect layaway purchasing has gone a bit by the wayside in recent years...but it's a great option for folks who are willing to wait to receive their purchased item until they can pay for it in full – and, unlike what happens when you use credit, my fiancé's company charges no interest on holiday layaway – just a down payment of either \$10 or 10% of the purchase. You can put items on layaway in late August and they need to be paid for and picked-up by mid-December.

Derrick told me about this holiday layaway policy as a way of telling me something really fantastic. See, every year at the store where Derrick works, there is a couple who comes in sometime ahead of Christmas and pays-off someone else's layaway items.

This couple comes into the store, says they have “X” amount of money to spend -- usually between \$200 and \$300 dollars – and they then ask the staff to find a layaway order with about that much left to be paid. They make sure the order they pay-off includes children's items. This couple never had children of their own, so they make a point to bless someone else's children every Christmas.

When the person comes in to the store to make their next layaway payment, someone has the fun job of explaining that it's now paid in full. Which, of course, means they can take their items weeks earlier than they expected. The couple does this layaway pay-off anonymously and Derrick has had the privilege of being the one who gets to explain this gift to its recipients.

He said there is usually a fair amount of confusion when he shares this good news: “What do you mean my layaway is paid-off? I just came in here to make another payment...” But soon the confusion gives way to shock, then joy, then quiet gratitude as they walk away with their purchase – sooner than they expected to have it, and at a far lower cost to them than they had planned.

I loved learning about this so much and, after hearing about it, I very nearly marched right down to his store to pay-off someone *else's* layaway!

Selflessness in our often self-centered culture: a sign of living into the promise that turns the world upside-down...the promise Mary sang about 2,000 years ago in her Magnificat...the promise we anticipate during Advent and that we celebrate at Christmas.

This promise that God's power and strength were born into the world through a powerless girl in a humble stable. This promise that turned a horrific death into a glorious resurrection. This promise that reminds us God will be with us no matter what...and that God will work for good through it all

This promise is the good news of Christmas. Like Mary, we are called to be bearers of this promise – bearers of this good news. Because this world is *always* in need of good news to help turn it upside-down.

This weekend, our Jesus And Me children's program kids are having a birthday party for Jesus during their Sunday School time. And, when they leave, they will be receiving a “birthday party for Jesus” kit they can use at home.

The kit contains a box of cake mix, a can of frosting, a candle, and a card with space on it for the kids to write down *their* gift to Jesus this Christmas. I love this idea so much and I am so excited our children's ministry team decided to do this with and for our McCabe kids

I love the idea of asking kids what *they* will do to give Jesus a birthday gift at Christmastime. It helps kids think beyond themselves at a time when they are likely very focused on the gifts *they* hope to receive.

But this concept does not need to be just for kids. We are *all* called to give a gift to Jesus this Christmas...and the best way to give Jesus a gift is to do something that blesses someone else. Doing so is our way of thanking God for the promise of Christmas. Let us pray.

God of Advent, thank you for this time of waiting and preparation for Christmas. Thank you for this time of focusing our hearts on you and on your promised presence in Jesus Christ. Like Mary, help us to be bearers of your good news...help us to look for your power and strength in quiet, humble places. And may we help turn this world upside-down by looking beyond ourselves – this season and always; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.