

SPEAKER: We have already heard the scripture lesson, read so eloquently by Brother [INAUDIBLE] and Sister Val. Just want to emphasize the second half. Mary cries out my soul, magnifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in the God, my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the loneliness of His servant. Surely from now on, generations will call me blessed for the mighty one has done great things for me. God's mercy is for those who fear God.

From generation to generation, He's shown strength with His arm. He is scared the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He's brought down those who think themselves powerful, and lift it up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. God helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy, according to the promise made to our ancestors that Abraham and to God's descendants forever and ever. An attitude of gratitude. An attitude of gratitude.

Does anybody here remember the Flintstones? Some of you may recall that there was a spinoff show. 1971 and '72, I used to watch it when I was a kid in the '80s, it was the teenage Pebble's and Bamm-Bamm Show. I used to watch this growing up. And there was one character that I'll never forget. His name was Bad Luck Schleprock. Bad Luck Schleprock was always in a dunk. He wore all gray. A storm cloud followed him everywhere. Bad things were always happen in the Bad Luck Schleprock. And bad things always happened when Bad Luck Schleprock was around. His signature phrase was, Wowzy, wowzy, woo-woo.

Have you ever known anybody like this? I'm talking about somebody who's negative all the time. If they're conscious, they're complaining. If they're awake, they're whining. Wowzy, wowzy, woo-woo. If you don't know anybody like this, you better nod your head anyway so somebody might think it's you. A dark cloud is always hovering over their head. If you ask, how are things going today? They'll proceed with a list of grievances. They're driving me crazy at home. Folk just getting on my nerves at my job. My money is funny, my change is strange. It's too cold outside today. Lord, it's too hot outside today. I'm sick, and I'm tired. And I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. Wowzy, wowzy, woo-woo.

People can be like that. This is true of people and in my world, this can also be true of preachers. I remember some of the congregational prayers down South for my youth, Brother Brian. I can recall the preacher would come to the microphone and read off a litany of ailments and illnesses to the Lord. The prayers went something like this, Lord, it's once again that we come before your throne as humbly as we know how. You woke me up this morning when the walls to my room could have been the walls to my grave, my covers could have been my wind and sheet, and my mattress could have been my cooling board.

We lift up Ella May and her diabetes to you, Lord. Mother Jones has bunions today. We pray for the Pastor's gout and be a Preparation H for elder Lucy's inflammation oh, God. But we want to thank you while we're toiling through the storm and the rain and our trials and tribulations. We're limping from arthritis but we're going to make it to see you over yonder oh, God. Thank you for being good. Amen. And by the time you leave church, you feel like you need to go to a doctor. Wowzy, wowzy, woohoo.

My brothers and sisters, many of us could learn a lesson from Mary, the mother of Jesus, this morning. This was a woman who had much to lament. She was from an impoverished village in Nazareth. She was pregnant under what neighbors would have considered questionable circumstances. She lived on the underside of the Roman Empire. And from the view of most, she was delivering a child at the wrong time, in the wrong family, in the wrong zip code. Mary had reason to gripe and groan.

Mary had reason to lament her personal conditions and her social circumstance, but rather than focus on all that was wrong, Mary shifted her interpretive lens. Mary believe that she was pregnant with possibility, and that's why Mary cried out to the Lord, my soul magnifies You and my spirit rejoices in the God of my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the loneliness of its servant. And for now, surely, folk will call me blessed, for God has done great things for me. We know her situation was not ideal.

We know that she didn't have the best of circumstances. We know that her situation was anything but perfect. But this is why I believe that Mary has something to teach us about gratitude this morning, having an attitude of gratitude. For gratitude is not a mere empty appreciation. Oh it's not a mere rote. Thank you, I'm talking about the capacity to revel in all of the opportunities and blessings that God has gifted to us in this particular moment. Well we look around and we're able to say, things may not be what I want to be but I thank God that things are what they are.

And when I look around and I see all of the blessings in my life, I have to say, if not only, if only in this moment, glory be to God, for God has done great things. That's an attitude of gratitude. Scientists and researchers know the many positive feelings that emerge from sincere gratitude. Oh, for when we are thankful for what we have, it's amazing how we can begin to look at the things that we don't have so differently.

When we can think about the gifts of life that surround us, the showers of blessings that cover us, we can oh consider differently negative circumstances that would otherwise break our hearts and break our spirits. It's an attitude of gratitude. I can remember, I'm sitting here looking at brother Preston and sister Connie Williams this morning. I remember a few years ago, I got a call just a couple of years ago, that sister Williams, during the winter, had slipped on the ice and fall and it broke and a hip.

I remember when I used to receive that call, brother Preston, my sister, and Elizabeth could tell you, first thing I did was I went in my office and I closed the door and I started to cry, because all I could think about were the negative implications and possible negative outcomes of someone in their 80s breaking their hip. But I called sister Williams in the hospital. You remember this? I called you in the hospital and I said, sister Williams we need you. We need you to get up because there's a little boy and little grandson named Noah.

And before I could get out, get that out my mouth, she said, oh Noah's here with me right now Noah is he in the hospital and Noah has been keeping me company. He's here coloring right now and oh, yeah, I'm going to get up because I got to play with Noah. I've been waiting on this grandson for too long and I'm just so thankful to have him here with me. Do you remember that, sister Williams? And I remember in that moment, I felt something in my spirit saying, I got a feeling that everything is going to be all right.

It's this kind of attitude, of gratitude, that can lift our spirits. It can heal our bodies. It can change our orientation toward the world, when we're not thinking about what's wrong but we're thinking about what's around us that's right. Compassion, joy, and hope, all spring from the wells of gratitude. And this is why, I would argue, looking at sister Mary in the text, that grace and gratitude go hand-in-hand with one another. For when you and I are truly grateful for the blessings of our life, no matter how small, we'll be more inclined to be a blessing to somebody else.

Because just as grace and gratitude go hand in hand, gratitude and greed cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Oh, woe to the man. Woe to the man who has benefited from the goodness and grace of others. Woe to the person, somebody taught you when you were unteachable, loved you when you were unlovable, encouraged you when you were incorrigible. Yet now, you believe yourself to be a self-made man who owes the world nothing. Woe to that man. Woe to the government.

Woe to a government who benefits from and exploits the resources of other nations for its own quote, unquote, prosperity. Yet that government feels the need to erect walls of isolation and reject global interdependence. Woe and woe to the nation who looks upon the migrant family with a child and declares to that family, there's no room at the inn for you. Wowzy wowzy woohoo. But Mary, on the other hand,-- Mary realized something. Mary realized that she could not carry hope in her womb while having resentment in her heart.

Mary could not give birth to light while walking in darkness. Just as a plant wilts in darkness yet stretches and grows toward the sun, our hearts and our health brothers and sisters shrivel when shrouded in negativity. But our hearts expand when we count our blessings. This is why Mary declares that the baby she will deliver will be the baby that will deliver the world. For God didn't just bless me for my own sake, my blessing will be a blessing for the entire world. Why? Because gratitude, grace, and goodness all are inextricably bound up together.

As we welcome the Christ child this Christmas season, I want you to join me in reflecting on all the blessings that God has given us. I want you to take your mind off your problems and put your mind on your problem solver. Embrace an attitude of gratitude. Everybody in this place close your eyes right now.

Think about what you have. Consider how God's grace has shown up. Heartbreak, yes. Despair, yes. But now, think about all the many blessings that surround you each and every day. Now ask yourself this question, what am I going to do with it?