

“All that Glitters is Not Glory”

Luke 1:39-56

Series: The Advent Conspiracy Week 1. Worship Fully

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A few years ago CNN posted an article called *It's Not Christmas Without Glitter*. Reporter Ann Hoevel raves,

I could stare for days, hypnotized by the shiny allure of the decorations. Of course, the glitter is not only on my tree. If you handle glitter, it goes everywhere with you. After a day of decorating, flakes of glitter stick in my hair and on my cheeks, so that I notice them glinting out of the corner of my eye for hours to come. I'm not the only glitter lover out there. "Glitter has really exploded this year," said Jo Pearson of Michael's craft stores who calls herself the "glitter queen." We believe in the power of glitter to bring joy and wonder to any setting.

Glitter, of course, isn't just on the inside. Here are a few examples of the power of glitter.

- For years, Bernie and Denise Lumsden covered every inch of their Bristol, England, home, inside and out. But they had to pull the plug on their "twinkling beacon of Christmas Joy," when the electric company and health inspector shut them down.
- Alex Goodwind's annual festival of lights involves more than 115,000 bulbs in a display worth more than \$45,000. If you look carefully in the picture you will see the neighbor next door also put up some lights that spell "Ditto."
- The front lawn of the DeSario home in Ontario, Canada is a stage for a huge nativity scene that creates a veritable funhouse of illumination. But it's hard to find the Nativity scene in the middle of the glitter.

It's fun to decorate and scatter glitter at Christmas. Yet every year the glory of Jesus gets more lost among all the glitter. That's a tragedy because the real power that brings joy and wonder is not glitter but God's glory. Glory refers to God's presence and power. God is not only up in heaven. God's presence shines around us. God's power is present everywhere. Just as light fills our world even when clouds block the sun, so God's glory reflects off everything even though you can't see the Lord's face.

So why isn't God's glory more obvious? We spend too much time focusing on the glitter. Our eyes are dazzled by the decorations the world drapes in front of us. Try this sometime: stand outside where you can see a beautiful sunlit landscape. Then take two quarters and hold them up close to your eyes. If you focus on money or materialism, they block out the rest of the world. The truth is, you can substitute anything for those two quarters – worry, alcohol, your phone, social media, drugs, an affair, workaholicism, pleasing people, perfectionism – anything can block your soul for seeing the big picture. Your soul is the lens of your life. It is the way things enter into you. Maybe the lens of your soul is

stained by sin or scratched by a poor self-image. Maybe it's cracked by abuse. If your soul focuses on the world's glitter, you will miss God's glory.

It should be easy to glimpse His glory during Advent and Christmas. Actually, it's getting harder and harder to see the glory of the Christ Child in the manger. Why? One word: Christmas. Last year Americans spent \$886 billion on Christmas. That's double what we spent 20 years ago and, except for 2008, it's gone up every year since. So during the same time our culture is becoming less Christian it's spending exponentially more on Christmas. We've turned Christmas into something so expensive and so exhausting it actually pushes Jesus out of the way. He's not even invited to His own birthday party.

Let's not miss Christmas. Let's make Christmas meaningful again. This year we are joining up with The Advent Conspiracy. Fear not. This is not another conspiracy theory. It's a movement of Christians around the country who want to tone down the glitter and turn back to the simple, wonderful glory of the Christ Child born in the manger. The authors of the Advent Conspiracy write,

We spend hundreds of billions of dollars during the holiday season, hoping – whether we admit it to ourselves or not – that the latest and greatest gift will fulfill us and those we give gifts to. This (we think) will bring us joy.

The heart of what we're truly searching for – hope, peace, love, rest, worship – is buried in the seasonal chaos. Each step we take toward an overstuffed schedule and an overextended budget is one step further away from the nativity.¹

Now please hear me brothers and sisters. I do not want to load you down with a lot of guilt and shame about your Christmas traditions. This Advent we hope to push back the world's glitter so we can experience the glory of Jesus. Our preparation for Jesus' arrival begins not in the mall or on Amazon but with worship. Let's Worship Fully. Not just in this building but throughout the season. Truth is: we are always worshiping – whether it's things, money or the Master. We worship what we desire. We give our time, money, attention and energy to what we worship. We become like what we worship. This is why it's so essential to focus your soul not on the world's glitter but on God's glory.

One of the most focused souls in history is Mary. Her life has no glitter. The real Mary is the opposite of the glittering Madonnas in churches and museums. Yet she is literally and spiritually filled with God's glory. After Mary agrees to be the mother of Jesus, she travels south from Nazareth to Judea near Jerusalem to be with her relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah who are also expecting a child. Apparently the Holy Spirit can't keep a secret because Elizabeth already knows Mary is pregnant. Mary is dying to talk about her secret. Now at last it bursts out in a song. Generations have called this by its Latin name: *The Magnificat*. Do you hear the word “magnify” in there? She sings:

¹ Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, Greg Holder, Advent Conspiracy, Zondervan, c. 2018, p. 46-47.

My soul glorifies (magnifies) the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. Luke 1:46-49

Mary offers her life and soul to be the magnifying glass for God's glory. Her calling is to bring the Messiah into the world and to raise Him to be the Savior of the world. She brings God's Light into our darkness. She is the way God becomes visible. This humble young woman with no formal education is able to see far into the future and grasp God's plan better than anyone else in history. She sings:

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. Luke 1:50

Mary knows her Child will bring God's forgiveness and salvation to countless generations yet unborn. She can see believers in far off times and places, in nations and languages she does not know, will turn to Jesus and be saved by His grace. Mary looks down the long years and rejoices that people, such as you and me, are gathered in places to worship Jesus, the Merciful One, the Mighty One, the Holy One.

Mary's purpose is to focus the glory of God, to shine the Light of Jesus into this dark world. That is our purpose as well. Yet the rest of Mary's song reveals three smudges on the lens of the soul, three blotches or splotches which prevent God's Light and God's glory from shining through us.

The first is **Pride**. She sings, "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts" (Luke 1:55). Pride is often used in a positive way in our world today. People are proud of their ethnic heritage. Many are "proud to be an American." This type of pride is different. Perhaps a better word is selfishness or self-centeredness. The problem with pride is we put the focus not on God or others but on me. It's somewhat like turning a telescope or binoculars backwards. Now it's focused on you. But when you look through it the image is all messed up. It makes everything else seem very small and far away. That's what pride does. It maximizes my importance and minimizes everything and everyone else, including God. Pride, over time, also tends to push people far away. Few people can stand to be around selfishness for very long. Most of the world's problems - war, injustice, prejudice, divorce, and broken families - ultimately have their root in the soil of selfish pride.

There are actually two types of pride – both cause problems. The obvious one puffs you up. You put yourself first. You place your wishes and your will ahead of everyone else's. Just open the doors on Black Friday and you'll see this type of pride in action. The other, less obvious form is false pride or reverse pride. If the first kind puffs you up, in the second kind you put yourself down. Those who suffer from reverse pride often say, "I'm no good. I always fail. I deserve this." It sounds humble but it's really hurtful and harmful. It's a form of self-pity. It attracts the comfort and concern of others...for a while. But soon, their compassion wears out and it becomes just a pity party for one. So one type of pride magnifies strengths, the other majors in weaknesses. But both focus the lens on me. What's the solution? Instead of puffing yourself up or putting yourself down, put the focus on God

and others. A lens is supposed to be clear, almost invisible, in order to focus the Light and let it shine through. So don't think less of yourself, just think about yourself less and others more.

The second smudge on the lens is **Position**. Mary sings, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble" (Luke 1:52). In Mary's day, rulers sat high above everyone else on a throne to emphasize their position and power over their subjects. Humble peasants were not allowed to approach the throne or even look the ruler in the eye. All heads had to be down. Over the centuries, Mary's home in Galilee was ruled by a succession of emperors – Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Maccabeans, Romans and Herodians. She probably also knew that no matter how powerful a king became, he was often knocked down from his position by the next conqueror. Her Son will be a different ruler. He willingly came down from the highest position, from the throne of heaven, to live in the lowest position on earth – a manger, a cross, a tomb. He used His power not to put people down but to lift the humble up.

You and I are each placed in a position of power. It may be a position of authority, influence and respect at school, in the home, at work, in this community, here at church. How are you using your power and position? Are you lifting people up or putting them down?

The third smudge on the lens is **Possessions**. Mary continues singing: "He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53). None of us would call ourselves rich. Yet by every possible comparison with the majority of the world, we are rich. And yet, our celebration of Christmas is focused on filling our overstuffed homes with more stuff. We also know, despite what the commercials on TV tell us, that stuff will not make us happier. In fact stuff often causes more stress. We have to find things, go into debt for them, store them, maintain them, insure them, repair them, and get rid of them. How does Mary want us to celebrate her Son's birthday? By filling the hungry with good things. These are the people who are empty, lonely, lost. These are the physically hungry and the spiritually hungry. Let God focus your life. Let Him shine the Light of Jesus through your life. Let your purpose be to bring the glory of God into the darkness of poverty and despair. Nobody needs more glitter.

One very dark place which needs God's glory this Christmas is the Ukraine. Seven million have fled Ukraine. 7.1 million are internally displaced. 6 million are without power and clean water. The oncoming winter is deepening their darkness and despair. You can bring the Light and Hope of Jesus to them. Your gift to our Christmas offering for Ukraine provides housing, medical care, food, education, counseling, worship services and Bible studies. 100% of your gift will be used by the Outreach Foundation to support trusted partners on the ground in Poland, Lithuania and inside Ukraine. Let the Light of Christ shine on them this Christmas.