Ugly Christmas Sweater

(Luke 1:26-38)

It’s such a wonderful time of year and I count it a great privilege to celebrate with you the miracle of God who became one of us in the form of this little baby named Immanuel, Jesus, God with us. I am calling today’s message “Ugly Christmas Sweater” and I want to talk to you about letting go of some of the ugly things in our lives that hold us back spiritually. Some of you have made it a tradition each year to choose the most obnoxious, gaudiest sweater you can find to wear to your Christmas celebrations and it’s actually become a cultural phenomenon. But the thing is that many people also choose to put on ugly attitudes with them, and so as we gather together with family and friends during the Christmas season some of us find ourselves hurting those we love with our ugly thoughts, words, motives, and actions.

However, Christmas is meant to be a time of love, joy, peace, and happiness because of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. And so, my prayer today is that things will change for us this Christmas and that you and I can celebrate Jesus in the way we think, speak, and live toward the people around us. And so, we’re going to have to be intentional, focusing on our thoughts, rewiring the way we think, because our words and actions begin internally before they are expressed externally. I believe with prayer and the help of the Holy Spirit we have a good chance of catching them deep inside at the point of conception, filtering them and rewiring our thoughts, so that we’re able to live lives of love, joy, and peace this Christmas season.

But I also recognize that this isn’t going to be any easy task because it’s a lot like digging out the box of Christmas lights each year in order to light up the house or tree. You know, it never fails, after the tedious task of untangling the wiring, there will always be a bulb out, and it’s that one single bulb that will cause the entire strand not to work. And so, it can be overwhelming untangling and tracing the wiring until you find the source of the problem. And in the same way, untangling the twisted thought processes and default places where our mind goes can be a tricky and difficult endeavor; but it’s absolutely necessary if we’re going to experience the transformation God wants in our lives. And even though it may feel like mission impossible, we need to remember that with God all things are possible. And so, I believe that God is about to speak to you and I about letting go of some stuff that is holding us back from experiencing his unlimited goodness.

As we turn to the Word of God, I want to read you a passage of Scripture that is just a launching point to get us deeper into the Christmas story. And the Scripture God drew my attention to today comes from Micah chapter five, verse two. The prophet said,

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).*

Lord God and Father, we thank you for your Word to us, and we celebrate the fact that you are our God, that you are a loving God, and that you are a good God. And we acknowledge that these Words are divine revelation through which you have revealed your Son Jesus Christ to us so that we may have life and have it to the full. We invite you Holy Spirit to come and minister to us today, bringing revelation, conviction, and restoration so that we may love you and serve you, doing ministry that glorifies you, and the Father, and the Son. Amen.

What attracted me to this text was the fact that the prophet prophesied about Jesus in a time of spiritual decline and compromise much like today, when the nation of Israel spiritually was really just such a tangled mess. It was in that context that Micah came preaching to a nation of rebellious and messed-up people, speaking about a future hope, and it’s that same hope which keeps us rooted in the promise of God through every season of life. It’s our Living Hope, Jesus Christ, who was born to take away our sin, but he was born in the most unlikely place. The prophet said,

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come.”*

And so, God was bringing the greatest gift imaginable out of an impossible situation. And if there was ever a time that we needed to believe where we started doesn’t have to be where we finish; if there was ever a time that we needed to know that what we see is no match for what God has spoken it’s now. That’s what we need to know right now, that’s the story of Christmas, that’s our expectation as we bring this year to an end. And so, God is speaking to us today, he’s peering deep into our hearts to see what’s growing inside of us.

The Holy Spirit tells us God is performing spiritual surgery, “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

And so, God is looking deep inside to see that little thing that he is doing inside of us right now. But he’s also doing some diagnostics, and so we need to remember that God doesn’t see our lives from where we are, he sees where we are finishing, and at the same time he’s looking to see what’s blocking his Word from being effective and fruitful in our lives.

You see, unless you understand that your life first started in the mind of God, you won’t have the confidence to finish it with the favor of God. And so, in order to align ourselves with this great thing that God is doing in us today we need to look at Luke chapter 1, because eight centuries after Micah prophesies of this one who will come out of Bethlehem, this one who will be ruler over Israel, the Christmas story we’re more familiar with, Luke tells us in verse 26,

*“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:26-29).*

Even before we meet Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem celebrating the birth of God’s son Jesus Christ there were whispers from heaven to earth, from divinity to carnality, words which were not only confusing, but they were disturbing. Luke tells us that Mary was greatly troubled by the angel’s words and I want to draw your attention to the fact that we often have the tendency to overlook the simple truth that words hold incredible power. They can be as ugly as the sweaters we wear to Christmas parties and so we need to be careful of what we say to one another because God wants us to use our words to build others up and not tear them down.

In fact, we have an incredible responsibility in the way we speak to each other, because the Bible says in Proverbs chapter 18,

*“The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21).*

And so, how we speak to one another can give life or take life away. There may be some of you who remember things that were said to you by your parents when you were a child, your coach when you were middle school, teachers when you were in high school. And for some of you it may have been decades ago and those words were life-giving, but on the other hand there were people who said things that scarred you, hurt your self-esteem, damaged you emotionally and those words have held you captive. Some of you like Mary were greatly troubled and you need to figure this out because you never thought you’d be experiencing what you’re experiencing right now. But the angel said in verse 30,

*“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*“The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:30-35).*

Now, Mary could have resisted, she could’ve said, “But that’s not part of my five-year plan, this is just a bad time for me, that’s too inconvenient because I’ve already bought my wedding dress.” But she didn’t say any of those things, instead she answered,

*"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38).*

She is troubled by the angel’s words, she’s disturbed and confused, but she chooses favor over fear, surrender over control, and says “May everything you've said about me come true. Let it be to me according to your word.” And she was willing to entrust herself, trusting God’s timing, and trusting the whole situation into the capable hands of the Lord.

Now, certainly, Mary demonstrated great faith, to live this out it takes faith, but you need to know that on the other side of your faith, you will always see the faithfulness of God. Mary recognized these words spoken over her by the angel were beyond her control, but she also recognized that it was within her power to surrender. And so, even though she was greatly troubled by the angel words, even though her hopes and dreams were shattered, she willingly accepted the fact that God had something different, something better for her,

*“Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).*

And there are some of you here today who have plans, hopes and dreams, but God has something different for you like Mary. Maybe, you thought you would be married by now. Maybe you’re married and thought two kids was enough but you got a bonus round. Or just the opposite, you hoped for three, but discovered that you couldn’t conceive your first and so you’re troubled, disturbed and confused. Like Mary you didn’t think it would be this way, it’s just really inconvenient, it’s disappointing, but like Mary you don’t know the whole story. You see, she didn’t know that three decades later her son would be crucified, rising from the dead, and saving us from our sins. In the same way, you don’t know what’s going to happen in your particular situation either.

Mary had a decision to make between her dreams and God’s destiny, her plans and God’s purpose, and so she had to choose between trying to control her life or surrendering to God’s calling. And what I really love about this story is that even though Mary didn’t understand the plan, she trusted that God had a purpose that was greater. Realizing that she doesn’t always have the power to control her life, she surrendered to God’s greater purpose and said,

*"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).*

Like Mary, when we set aside our will, and surrender to God’s will, we take the spotlight off ourselves and place it on the true hero of our story, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But it’s not easy to surrender, trusting God with our past, our present, and our future.

However, what I have found to be interesting is that the more I try to control things in my life, the more I greatly overestimate my ability to control things and underestimate the unlimited power and goodness of God. While everywhere around us our culture tells us, “It’s up to you, you’ve got to make it happen, you’ve got to be strong” but Jesus says something that is completely opposite. While our desire is to remain in control, like an ugly Christmas sweater, it’s meant to do one thing, and that is draw attention to ourselves. However, Jesus said,

*“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35).*

In other words, if you cling to your life, trying to remain in control, you’re actually going to lose it. But if instead, you give up your life, if you surrender it to me, Jesus says, you will find it.

In other words, when the will of God is our motivation and we allow Jesus to guide our words and actions, when we say no to ugly thoughts and motives this Christmas, we’re able to put on Christ, glorifying God like Mary who said,

*"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).*

But surrendering control like that isn’t just a one-time decision, it’s a daily decision, and so with the same kind of intention it takes to pick out your favorite ugly Christmas sweater or those Christmas morning pajamas, this is the same kind of purposeful intention that it takes to surrender to the will of God.

But just because you surrendered control of your life back in 1999 doesn’t mean that you’re going to wake up each day with godly thoughts and actions. Just because you surrendered control to Jesus back then doesn’t mean that you don’t need to make a purposeful decision each day to be led by the Holy Spirit. And so, in order to move from ugly thoughts to godly ones, we’ve got to be purposeful in how we treat others, submitting to the direction of the Holy Spirit, and choosing daily to rewire our thoughts, or as Paul says,

*“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).*

And I wonder how different our lives might be if we were began each day with all the reasons to rejoice rather than focusing on all the reasons for anger, bitterness, and frustration. You know, if we would be purposeful, having the same intentionality as we would put on an ugly Christmas sweater, just maybe our thoughts could be transformed from ugly to beautiful, before they ever result in actions. A crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair, but we’ve got to think differently. That’s why Jesus said,

*"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).*

In other words, to really follow him, to follow his command to love, we’ve got to intentionally deny ourselves and put love into action. Because moving from ugly actions to godly ones is as intentional as putting on an ugly Christmas sweater and it starts with love. What I’m talking about is the Greek word agape, which means a sacrificial love, it’s a love that will cost us something.

And so, as we consider Mary, she was willing to pay the price, she humbled herself, surrendering her life and her circumstances to what God had said. And what’s really interesting is that with every decision she made to surrender something to God, with every decision she saw the faithfulness of God in her circumstances. You know, just imagine if you’re dating Joseph and suddenly find yourself pregnant. And so, now you’ve got a problem because you’ve got to explain how you got pregnant. What if he doesn’t believe that the Holy Spirit got you pregnant? For that matter why would he believe you?

But Mary surrenders, trusting God with the details, and she doesn’t know this, but God sent Gabriel to appear to Joseph in a dream and said,

*“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20).*

And so, Mary surrenders, there is confirmation, and she sees the faithfulness of God in her circumstance.

Now, the people around town are whispering, because here’s this young girl who is pregnant, they know how this happened and so she’s shamed when she goes out in public. But what happens next, the Holy Spirit confirms this is of God to her relative Elizabeth, that this child is Immanuel and so she says to Mary,

*“Blessed is the child you will bear, but why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me” (Luke 1:42-43).*

And Mary is comforted again.

Many months later, she’s riding on a donkey to Bethlehem, when suddenly at the most inconvenient time she begins giving birth. It’s happening, the baby’s coming, but there were no rooms available at the Comfort Inn and there is no Motel 6. Mary trusts God in a less than ideal situation and he provides a place of shelter. Shepherds show up to worship confirming,

*“This thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about” (Luke 2:15).*

Sometime later King Herod hears about this baby, this one who is to be king of the Jews, he’s disturbed and so he’s going to make sure this baby never grows up to become a threat to his throne.

*“And he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (Matt 2:16).*

But Mary trusts God, believing that if he called her to it, that he would get her through it. And so, now she’s on the run, but she surrenders her fears to God’s favor and trusts him with this child. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

*"Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt” (Matt 2:13).*

Now, three wise men, magi from the east had just come providing them with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And so, they flee to Egypt with the provision of God because lots of gold can help you when you’re on the run, right? And Mary trusts God, surrendering to him, and time and time again she encounters the faithfulness of God.

Now, fast forward 30 years, Jesus Christ is in the garden in Gethsemane, and he’s agonizing because he knows what’s about to happen to him. He’s praying, the pressure is so intense, he is crying out to his heavenly Father and he says,

*"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me (referring to the cup of suffering that is coming) yet not my will” and then he says the same thing his mother said. He said, “Yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).*

And he goes to the cross, his mother is there, he’s beaten so badly that he’s unrecognizable. The people are spitting on him, cursing him, and he’s suffering. He could’ve acted and taken control, calling upon legions of angels to wipe them out, but what did Jesus do, he said,

*"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).*

And he surrendered, breathing his last.

I wonder what is that ugly thing, like an ugly Christmas sweater, that you’re trying to hold onto, that you’re trying to control, that God wants you to surrender? What I’d like to do is give you an invitation and create an opportunity where God could do something special in your life. And so, I want to encourage you to let go of the ugly things in your life that are holding you back spiritually. What is that thing that you need to surrender, that burden on your heart, maybe unforgiveness and bitterness in a relationship, maybe a crushing fear, the pain of something you’ve lost, or the guilt of something that you did and you can’t undo?

Whatever it is, I want you to name it right now, maybe write it down on a piece of paper. But I want to encourage you to give God that burden that you’ve been carrying and trying to control because the Bible says,

*“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).*

And that’s why this message is so important, it’s so meaningful for me, because there is a spiritual responsibility that I feel, I care for you more than you could ever imagine. And I struggle, wrestling and agonizing as I share the Word of God with you, because I recognize that I can’t control you, but I want you to find the fullness of life in Christ. And so, I hope and pray that I can help you experience the freedom Christ came to give. Saying yes and choosing to surrender, because I know that God can do way more through your surrender than you could ever do through your control. And so, as we close, my prayer is that you would surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit, allowing yourself to become a reservoir of the love of Jesus, overflowing this Christmas as your words and your actions reflect God’s love toward those around you. May your prayer be like Mary’s,

*"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38, ESV).*

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