

1 The Good News of the birth of Jesus, the Good News of Christmas, promises joy for the lowly. We know that the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem were considered lowly, but who are the lowly today, and how is it possible that the birth of a child over two-thousand years ago could possibly bring joy to someone living apart from the privileged elite of our modern culture?

What would you guess were the lowest paid jobs in the United States in 2018? If you guessed school custodians, you'd be wrong. According to a survey reported in USA Today, the very lowest paid occupations include laundry and dry-cleaning workers, food preparers and servers, dishwashers, cashiers, maids and housekeepers, sewing-machine operators, childcare workers, and personal care aides, all with median annual earnings in 2018 of \$26,000 or less.¹ Of course, money isn't everything, and a 2018 Forbes survey of the least trusted professions in terms of honesty and ethical standards included members of congress at the very bottom, followed by car salesmen, journalists, lawyers, building contractors, and real estate agents.² If you work in one of those industries, then congratulations. By modern American standards, you could be considered "lowly."

2 The Biblical ideas behind the idea of lowliness go considerably beyond income and social status, so before we can fully appreciate the extent to which each of us might belong to the ranks of the lowly, we'll have to travel back in time to the months that preceded that first Christmas, when a young woman first learned she was pregnant and rushed off to share the news with her cousin. I'm continuing the story in the Gospel of Luke, picking it up in verse 46 of chapter 1, where Mary responds to the joyful greeting of Elizabeth with a joyful song of her own. **{Read Luke 1:46-56, NLT}**

I have to admit that Mary's song, or the "Magnificat" as it's traditionally referred to, is easy for me to breeze over in a reading of Luke's Gospel, much in the same way I often skimmed over Tolkien's frequent songs that interrupt the narrative flow of *The Hobbit*. Mary's song is very much like a psalm, and psalms somehow require a different way of

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/04/04/25-lowest-paying-jobs-in-us-2019-includes-cooking-cleaning>

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/01/11/americas-most-least-trusted-professions-infographic>

reading than a story. But Mary's song is there for a good reason, offering us clues as to who the lowly might be. It's worth slowing down and listening to more carefully as we draw close to Christmas.

3 Mary identifies herself as God's "lowly servant girl,"³ so you know you might be lowly if you're a servant. So ask yourself, "Am I a servant?" A servant is simply someone who serves someone else. If you're a cashier or a food server, then you're certainly a servant, at least for the duration of your work shift. But I think Mary had something more in mind than what we do to earn our living. When Mary called herself God's lowly servant girl, she didn't mean that she was willing to show up and do her part to advance God's plan as long as the wages and the working conditions suited her. Becoming the mother of Jesus wasn't a part-time summer gig to earn wages for college. A servant of God is more like a steward, someone who consistently holds God's plans and goals in their hearts and reflects them in their actions and speech.

By the way, generously serving others is an excellent way to do just that. The many who will show up here on Christmas Day to host, cook, serve, and clean up during and after the meal are all choosing to be lowly by taking on the life of a servant. While our modern culture might not accord wealth and status to those who serve others, we know that's exactly what God blesses.

4 Do you remember this proverb? Be like the bamboo: The higher you grow, the deeper you bow. In her song, Mary paints a picture of the upside-down Kingdom of God, where the proud, arrogant, and powerful are scattered and the humble are exalted, or lifted up. So ask yourself, "Am I humble?" You might be humble if you're powerless, living in a humble social status, or if you're humble in attitude, regarding others as better than yourself. I'd say Mary checked off all three of those particular boxes. I suppose it's possible to be powerless and arrogant at the same time, but I'm having a hard time imagining how that might be. Remember that God looks beyond our outward appearances and circumstances and into our hearts, and so assuming that God will bless you just because you live simply is a mistake. Mary's humble attitude and actions revealed her lowliness more clearly than the

³ Luke 1:48, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

circumstances of life that she found herself in.

5 Jesus would later elaborate on Mary's song of lowliness in this very same Gospel by claiming Isaiah's prophecy for himself, when he said, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor."⁴ So ask yourself, "Am I poor?" If you are, then you may be lowly. Who are the poor? The poor are many more than just the ones wearing duct-taped sneakers and holding cardboard signs. The poor are anyone who is without- without food, without clothing, without power, without family, without friends, or without hope. And while there will always be those who are obviously and chronically poor, I believe the poor can also be each of us, in different ways and at different times. God isn't looking at our poverty, so much as the condition of our heart. It's poverty that leads us to a radical dependence on Christ that makes Christmas good news for the lowly poor.

Jesus also claimed to bear blessings for captives, who could also be considered lowly. People who are incarcerated are certainly captives, many with no outside view of the world and only limited contact with people outside the walls of their jail or prison. But there are many other captives as well: refugees stuck between borders; children and women who are being trafficked; those living under the power of an addiction. These lowly people will be blessed if they turn to the power and love of Jesus that is bigger and stronger than anything that holds them in captivity.

6 Look around the world today and you'll find so many other examples of lowliness: The elderly who are often lonely and left out, isolated by a diminished ability to see or hear, the loss of a driver's license, or a debilitating illness that keeps them confined at home; the grieving, who are burdened with a loss that weighs down their hearts and saps their joy of living; the mentally ill who struggle to cope with the things of daily life that would otherwise be taken for granted as routine. Christmas is an invitation to these people as well. Are you one of them? If we do an honest inventory of our lives, stripping away the carefully constructed facades that we show the rest of the world, each of us is somehow less than we

⁴ Luke 4:18, Ibid

pretend to be; more in need than we're willing to admit, and carrying burdens that sometimes cause us to stumble.

Perhaps what ultimately qualifies us as one of the lowly isn't the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but our attitude in recognizing our plight. Mary never pretended to be more than she was, a servant girl of God. She never imagined that she deserved any credit for being blessed to be the mother of Jesus. Instead of focusing her attention on all the potential trials she'd likely face in the days leading up to and following her pregnancy, she focused her attention on God, turning to praise instead of problems. I want to be more like Mary. How about you?

In ways we don't fully understand, the birth of Jesus set something in motion that makes it possible for all of us to sing songs of joy like Mary. Mary's song didn't eliminate her challenging circumstances, but it certainly must have changed her heart and been a blessing to Elizabeth. Maybe that was a gift of the Holy Spirit, who had earlier filled Elizabeth's heart and inspired her baby to leap with joy within her. Perhaps Christmas joy is an acknowledgement of the forgiveness that Jesus would make available to us when he willingly walked to the cross. Perhaps it's all of those things and more. Does it really matter?

Don't we all want more joy in our lives? All of us have the potential to be lowly, to receive the blessings that Mary sang about, and the joy she sang with. Perhaps we can get started on the path to rediscovering the joy of Christmas by following the example of Mary, who's response to Gabriel's astonishing announcement was itself so astonishing: "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."⁵



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⁵ Luke 1:38, Ibid