

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: December 18, 2011
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“LOVE FOR ALL”
Luke 1:46-55

What do you *really* want for Christmas? What do you desire above all else? If everything on your wish list ends up in gift-wrap under the tree, what will you still want?

How about love? Luke records four hymns about the love of God in Christ Jesus.

- First is the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55:

And Mary said:

My soul glorifies 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.

**His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.**

**He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud
in their inmost thoughts.**

**He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.**

**He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.**

**He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.”**

- Second is the Benedictus in Luke 1:67-80:

[John the Baptizer’s] **father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:**

**“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed
his people.**

**He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of
long ago),**

**salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us –
to show mercy to our fathers**

**and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him
without fear**

**in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.**

**And you, my child, will be called a prophet
of the Most High;**

**for you will go on before the Lord
to prepare the way for him,**

to give his people the knowledge of
salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come
to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

- Third is the Gloria in Luke 2:10-14:

The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

- Fourth is the Nunc Dimittis in Luke 2:27-32:

Moved by the Spirit, [Simeon] went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared
in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

Have you ever heard such love songs?

Granted, these are not conventional love songs. They are robust, visionary, and provocative. They are filled, not with marshmallow fluff, but with meat.

Nevertheless, the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria and the Nunc Dimittis are among the greatest love songs ever written, because they reveal the greatness of God’s love.

♥ 1st, they reveal the great nature of God’s *αγαπε* love. From these hymns we learn that...

🔔 The Lord is mindful of us (he is aware and heedful). Naturally, God is alert to events of global importance; yet he is equally attentive to our individual hopes and fears, joys and heartaches, victories and struggles. Mary praises the Savior, saying {1:48} “**he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant**”: God notices her poverty, and it matters to him.

🔔 The Lord is merciful. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary and Zechariah emphasize God’s mercy. This has two basic components: 1) forbearance to withhold punishment from those who deserve it; and 2) rescue from judgment, harm, danger, or trouble, even for those who do not deserve it.

🔔 The Lord is faithful. These texts speak of God remembering. We are not to conclude from this that he forgot something and then recalled it; rather, it means he always had it in mind, but in wisdom and goodness the LORD waited till just the right time to act.

🔔 The Lord is active. He acts upon his mindfulness, mercy, and faithfulness. God blesses Mary by having her give birth to Jesus. God keeps his covenant with Israel by sending his Son. God grants “**peace to those on whom his favor rests**” by giving them a Savior. God remembers his promise to Simeon by allowing him to see the “**light for revelation... and... glory**,” and even to cradle Jesus in his arms.

🔔 And the Lord is holistic in compassion and action. These hymns describe the spiritual edification of those who are humble before God and, *at the same time*, social honor for those in the lowest classes. They depict spiritual provision for those who thirst for righteousness *and* economic provision for the poor. They portray spiritual justification *accompanied by* socio-economic justice. They promise peace that is spiritual *and also* social and political.

The Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria and Nunc Dimittis reveal the nature of God’s love.

♥ 2nd, they reveal the great scope of God’s *αγαπε* love. When Mary says that “**he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant**,” she describes God’s mindfulness of every lowly person who trusts him. When Zechariah states “**the rising sun will ... shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death**,” he

testifies to God’s mercy toward all the oppressed. When the angel announces that “**a Savior has been born to you**,” he includes us in his Good News. When Simeon praises God the “**light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel**,” he declares that the Sovereign Lord is revealing his salvation to “**all people**.” The Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria and Nunc Dimittis reveal the scope of God’s love.

♥ 3rd, these hymns reveal the great demands of God’s *αγαπε* (agape) love.

✝ For one thing, there is the demand of a responsible response.

God’s love is universal in scope. Yet love that is compelled is not love at all, so God gives every human being the freedom to accept or to deny his love.

God demonstrates his love in countless ways, above all in the Messiah. Jesus is the ultimate catalyst of decision, and no one can remain neutral toward him. Either we receive him, accept God’s love and enter his realm or reject him, deny God’s love and die outside of the Kingdom.

But what sane person would do that? In the Magnificat it is the proud, the rulers who refuse to humble themselves, and the rich who think they need nothing from God. In the Benedictus it is the enemies of God’s people, those who will not acknowledge they need forgiveness, those who love the darkness, and those who are not willing to pay the price for peace. According to Simeon, it is the many people whom Jesus will cause “to fall”.

‡ There is also the demand of costly participation.

“The Mighty One [does] great things for” Mary.

But his blessing exposes her to the deep grief of her son’s betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

Zechariah and Elizabeth take {Lk 1:14} **“joy and delight”** in John’s conception and birth. But in thirty years Herod Antipas will have him beheaded.

God is also inviting us to costly participation. From these hymns we discover that that this entails humble submission to the Messiah, hunger for God, poverty before him, bold service to God in holiness and righteousness, walking in **“the path of peace,”** and sharing in his **“light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to... Israel.”**

This would be impossible, except that when we receive Jesus, not only as the babe of Bethlehem but as the {Rev 19:16} **“King of kings and Lord of Lords,”** then {1 Jn 4:12} **“God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”**

The Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria and Nunc Dimittis reveal the demands of God’s love.

What do you *really* want for Christmas?

How about God’s love that is empathetic, wise, beautiful, and enduring? God’s gentle love that pursues but does not overpower us? God’s forgiving love that keeps no record of wrongs? God’s ennobling love that accepts us at our worst, yet equips us to be our best? God’s creative and liberating love that enables us to serve and to manifest his Kingdom?

This is what is revealed in the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria, and the Nunc Dimittis. This is the word of the Lord to us.