

Good news for the rich and poor (Luke1:46b-55)

What a relief it might be to middle-class America to be sent away empty.

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Starting around Thanksgiving and heading into the New Year, there are plenty of opportunities to buy things for others (and ourselves). Children make their lists; adults send out packages. Churches even get into the act, offering opportunities for folks to give gifts to the needy. It all adds up to a lot of stuff.

Is it really what we need?

Middle-class America seems burdened with too much stuff. There are acres of self-storage units that no one seems to visit. People live in homes too full of things to get around. Closets are crowded, toy boxes too crammed to find something with which to play. When it's time to downsize, people find that a younger generation doesn't want the oak sideboard or the leather sectional of yesteryear.

But they aren't the only ones with stuff problems.

Giving to the poor is a popular Christmas pastime, but it comes with limits. Church members don't like to give anything too flashy, too fancy, or too expensive. Intake volunteers gently tell children that they aren't going to get the \$400 video game or designer jeans they want. They will be given so much donated stuff, boxes and bags of basketballs and Barbies--and little of it will be what they really want. Quantity

outweighs quality, or so it seems.

Which is why Mary's song sounds like good news to me this time of year.

What a relief it might be to middle-class America to be sent away empty! A clean closet, an empty garage, permission to be rid of Aunt Violet's heirloom vase--this is the stuff of dreams in the modern middle class. Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* has made giving things away into an almost religious act. Her disciples wax rhapsodic about getting rid of cookbooks, sweaters, and obscure kitchen implements. People long to be freed from the tyranny of the thing unused, regretted, or purchased merely to keep up with the Joneses. Perhaps Mary's song makes this freedom real.

Less of a stretch is the song's promise to the poor. Mary proclaims not that they be filled with anything, but with *good* things. The mismatch of donor whim and actual need is acute. What if instead of making due with what was on sale, left over, fun to buy, or virtuous, the poor could actually have what they want for Christmas?

Some studies suggest that giving poor people money without strings attached leads to better outcomes. Despite common stereotypes, the poor don't waste money on alcohol and lottery tickets. Poor people tend to invest in what they need: education, health care, housing. Enabled to take charge over their own futures, their stress levels drop and planning for the future becomes possible. It is the fruition of Mary's song: the poor are exalted when good things come their way.

For both rich and poor, Mary's song is good news. Though the reversal of power might seem fearful to some, perhaps we can imagine that in Mary's prophesy lies a better way of life. The coming of the Messiah means we are no longer ruled by the things that so readily divide. We are free to become children of God, and thus kin to one another. We are invited to live into the promise now.

It turns out what we really need for Christmas isn't more stuff, it's a Messiah. And he is coming soon.