

Every Sunday after worship, with few exceptions I stand in the Narthex and I exchange hugs and handshakes and a few words with many of you as you leave the sanctuary. One week a while back, one of the retired pastors who attends here commented on a statement I made during a sermon or a prayer that the call of the Gospel, the will of God is to turn the world as we know it upside down. He said he thought I had it backward, and that the world was already upside down and God was seeking to turn it right side up. Of course, he's right. So much about our world and our current reality is upside down and backwards and yet it has been our reality for long that it feels normal.

For more thousands of years, "civilized" societies have valued power and force over collaboration, control over kindness, extravagant wealth over generosity, exploitation over fairness, safety and security over welcoming the stranger. We treat other human beings as objects of exploitation, sacrificing their quality of life for cheap consumer products and big profits for large corporations. We strip the earth of her resources pretending that the destruction of the planet will not mean our own destruction.

It's no wonder that when the Christmas season comes around, many of us feel a tension in our spirits. The music playing in the stores is full of joy and good cheer. The images of Christmas are happy children, perfect families, abundant food and even more abundant gifts. Christmas songs tell us it's the most wonderful time of the year. It's as if the fantasy of Christmas begs us to pretend the reality of the world doesn't exist. And yet the Gospel message of the coming of the Christ child calls on us not to ignore the dysfunction of the world, but to shine a light on it, challenge it, and proclaim with deep faith that God's vision is something different.

You don't have to read very far into the New Testament to discover this truth. Our text this morning comes from the first chapter of Luke. Mary, a girl in her young teens who was engaged to be married was visited by an angel. In this visit Mary is asked to

be the mother of the messiah – to give birth to the incarnation of God’s love for the world. After she says “Yes” she hurries to visit her relative Elizabeth.

Usually when we hear a description of Mary, the mother of Jesus, it is that she was a sweet and gentle virgin who served as a vessel for God’s son to be born. Gentle Mary, meek and mild. This is the idea of Mary that I grew up with. I decided pretty early on that the virgin part of her description was probably less factual than allegorical but the rest of it stuck with me for a long time. And yet the reality of who Mary was based on the biblical text is a very different picture.

Mary has just made a huge, life-changing decision and she seeks out the one person who might be able to understand, even slightly, what she is going through. The angel had just told Mary that Elizabeth had conceived a son even though she was very old and had never been able to have children. Mary knew that Elizabeth was experiencing her own miracle pregnancy, plus she was older and wiser than Mary *and* her husband Zechariah was a priest. Yes, a visit to Elizabeth was exactly what Mary needed. So Mary sets out on the 100 mile journey from Nazareth to the hills of Judea.

When Mary finally arrives, she greets Elizabeth. This greeting could have included the reason for her visit. “Hi Elizabeth, sorry to show up unannounced but I just agreed to be the mother of the messiah. The angel Gabriel came to me telling me how it would all happen and then he told me you were six months pregnant. I am a little freaked out by all of this but I thought you might understand.” Elizabeth is so moved by her greeting that the baby she is carrying leaps in her womb. The Common English Bible translation of the text says that Elizabeth blurted out with a loud voice “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

After three or four long days of traveling, after not speaking to anyone about this miraculous development taking place in her life, Mary is told by Elizabeth that God has

blessed her. Elizabeth affirms Mary and names the many blessings taking place. Elizabeth looks upon this young teenage girl and says “You can do this. God chose you and I am honored to even be in your presence.”

It is these words of encouragement from Elizabeth that inspire Mary to break out into joyful praise. Mary is able to fully accept God’s call for her and to rejoice in what that call will mean for the world. Did you notice that as Mary is describing God’s actions, they are in the past tense? I always seem to forget this until I read the text again. She sings “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things...” She is speaking as if these things had already happened. Theologian and preacher Fred Craddock tells us that “one of the ways the faithful express trust in God is to speak of the future with such confidence that it is described as already here.” Mary’s faith and trust is so strong, that she is proclaiming God’s reign as already being fulfilled. It is out of this faith that her joy erupts.<sup>1</sup>

Craddock continues to say that “such faith is a prerequisite to being a participant in efforts to achieve that future. To celebrate the future as a memory, to praise God for having already done what lies before us to do: this is the way of the people of God.” You’ll notice that Rev. Craddock said what lies before us to do. Not what lies before God to do. God can do incredible work in the world, but it is done through our hands, our feet, our voices.

Before we seek to create justice, spread joy, offer compassion, or seek peace, we must begin with praising God, for these things are already and constantly in motion and God is inviting us to participate in an ongoing collaboration.

In what has become known as “The Magnificat” Mary sings words that have become familiar to many “My soul magnifies the Lord...” But Mary’s words are more than a simple song of praise for God. The Magnificat is a battle cry. This song, like

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<sup>1</sup> *Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year B Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1984, 36.

Mary's pregnancy itself, is a counter-testimony to the dysfunctional reality of the world. Mary proclaims: God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

In these words, we see in Mary not the meek and mild, sweet innocence of a young virgin, but the heart of a revolutionary who is determined to turn the world right-side up, to re-orient the unjust systems of society toward the love and justice of God. Mary's words are dangerous. They were dangerous then and they are dangerous now. We hear Mary's words echoed in the teachings of Jesus – in his sermon on the mount, in the way he fed people. I think Jesus learned a thing or two from his mom. But Jesus isn't the only one who was inspired by Mary's proclamation. Throughout history poor and oppressed people have often identified with these words. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called Mary's Magnificat "the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung." For this reason, people in power have often viewed Mary's words as dangerous and some countries such as India, Guatemala, and Argentina have banned the Magnificat from being recited in church worship or in public.

Philosopher, political activist, and author Cornel West is known for saying "Never forget, justice is what love looks like in public." This is the love of God that Mary is proclaiming this morning. Her baby, Jesus, will be and is, and was the incarnation of God's love. Jesus is what God's love would be if it had flesh and bone and walked among us. This song of Mary is not about vengeance against the rich and powerful, but about the re-orienting of the world toward God's love and justice. We each have the potential to bear God's love to the world. But we need not be meek and mild to emulate the mother of Jesus. In fact, I would argue we cannot be. It takes courage and boldness to undo systems of oppression, to lift up the lowly, to make sure the hungry are fed, to put an end to unchecked and exploitative power. To truly celebrate Christmas, is to join God in this work and in this powerful proclamation spoken by a most unlikely source – a poor, young, unwed mother, who would give birth to Love.