

“Inside Out and Upside Down”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 23, 2018

Micah 5:2-5

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.*

*If the Assyrians come into our land
and tread upon our soil,
we will raise against them seven shepherds
and eight installed as rulers.*

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Mary's Song of Praise

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He 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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, we hear your word for us this day. Be with us now as we reflect, consider, and are touched by your Living Word. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Last Sunday's worship and concert in the afternoon included wonderful carols and hymns of the season. Indeed, Advent and Christmas and Epiphany are seasons filled with songs that we know like no other. I think the Gospel of Luke has so many words like "rejoice" and "praise" and "singing." And we heard some of the songs this morning in Mary's Magnificat. Later in the same chapter of Luke, Zechariah makes a proclamation in song after the birth of his son, John the Baptist. In chapter two, Simeon sings praises, as does Anna, when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple. We can see songs of praise in the Psalms and hymns from Paul in his letters. There are many, many verses of Scripture that really are song. Words of song.

Luke's gospel, of course, began - and we were discussing these in recent weeks - with the angel who came to Zechariah telling him of a child to be born. He and Elizabeth had yearned for a child, and now their dreams were about to come true. We know that Mary was visited by the same angel and was startled by the angel's message. She had been planning to simply marry Joseph and lead a normal life. But the angel's message told her that other things were about to happen. And Mary responds, essentially, by giving her affirmation to the angel and to God.

And this brings us to this morning's passage about the visit between Elizabeth and Mary. I find it interesting to consider the parallels and the paradoxes that exist between these two women. For both of them, the world has been turned inside out and upside down. Here's an older woman beyond childbearing years who gets the surprise of her life: that she is going to bear a child. She's the wife of a high priest, the upper echelons of her people. She is known, but not always with admiration, for she was looked down upon by many because she did not have a child.

But Mary is also surprised - maybe even shocked - by the news of her pregnancy. She is young, she is of the peasant class, and while engaged, she is not yet married. And so she says, "How can this be?" And I'm reminded once again - in a passage like this - that God does work in mysterious ways. I find this story - this part of Luke - a story of compassion and shared wonder and amazement. I feel like Mary rushed to see Elizabeth because she knew that Elizabeth would be someone who would understand. Perhaps Elizabeth is the only person in the world who could really fathom what she's feeling. Life had been moving in one direction, and now it's turned inside out. And they come together and share with joy the mysterious and unexpected stories of their pregnancies. And I was struck by the fact that one scholar wrote when Mary and Elizabeth come together, so do Jesus and John for the first time. Elizabeth tells Mary, "My son senses your presence and the presence of your son"--a statement that gave me pause. Elizabeth's words are warm and welcoming and in their own way a radical statement. She welcomes a woman that many would condemn. She welcomes her perhaps because she understands how hard it is when others look down on you. And she receives Mary with joy, and the child within her does as well.

My sense is, too, that this visit provides Mary with some relief and release. For they are two women who understand the pain of rejection, the power of the most unexpected messages from angels, and the paradoxical joy of bearing a son who will also change the world. And so in response, Mary sings. And the words burst forth from her almost as if she is going to explode. Her radical words challenge the status quo with words of wonder and song and praise. She recounts that she is a lowly handmaiden called to bear the son of God. What could be more countercultural than that?

In those days, the Romans had incredible power over Mary's people. Many Jews are barely surviving, living on the edge, except for a few. Her words that come forth are words of hope and promise that things are going to change. And her words challenge the abuse of power and speak of the release of captives. Her words sing of the fulfillment of the promises of God for those who hunger and are hurting.

But I find, too, there's an interesting shift that takes place in the middle of her song. She begins with amazement at being the one chosen to be the mother of the Lord. She's not someone from among royalty or power, but unknown by the world. Notice, too, she does not say, "Why me?" But it's more like, "Wow. Me?" This turns the expectations of the world - both then and now - inside out. But the other thing is, she doesn't stay focused on herself. Her song goes on to speak about what it will mean for her people. She accepted the message of the angel and affirms her willingness to bear the child, but she knows he is not only going to be *her* son. He's someone who's going to save the world. And her words offer good news to all.

So as I reflected on this, I thought about the focus of this season being different in Advent than that of Lent. For many years, the church thought of Advent as a little Lent. A time of repentance, reflection, and awareness of the ways in which we within could be more faithful. But over time - fairly recently - our reformed tradition has reclaimed Advent with another focus. It is a season of preparation, but it's also one of anticipation and expectation. We anticipate the birth of Jesus and prepare for a time that cannot be exactly named the return of Christ. This season, then, is not just about focusing within. I think it's a season that refocuses us outward toward others. We see it in the action and the behavior of the two women. Their joy is also joy for the world. For while they will both bear sons, they will be messengers to the world. And in time, those sons will reach out to others and invite them to change. I think, too, it's reflected in the traditions of the season. We do challenge each other not to become overwhelmed; to get stressed out -- perhaps look at some of the things we do as a way to reflect on the message of the season, by giving to others not for what we receive in return, but like the wise ones who came bearing gifts, offered to those we love. We send cards to express the joy of the birth and our hopes for peace on earth, reflecting the message of the heavenly hosts in the field with the angels. We are invited to sing with joy like Mary did, about the wonders of God's love. And in this season like no other, we give to others in need; those who are hungry, and make possible a way for some parents who need to have a way to give to their children in this season.

Perhaps we should consider these traditions as more than chores to be accomplished, but ways of offering the good news to those around us. And in the midst of it all, we do sing. We sing as Advent leads to Christmas, and Christmas into Epiphany. These are not inward seasons. They are seasons when we are invited to renew the awareness of our call to serve others. These are the seasons for us to share joy, offer greetings and gather. For the messages that are centered in the gift of these two will, in the weeks to come, call us to prepare to follow those who come forth from these women. Faith, then, is not only to be an individual's response within. Faith is something also lived out in community and in service to others. When we do and be these things, we proclaim the good news. So perhaps the reminder that while the coming of this child and his cousin are more than those who will be birthed forth as infants, they will bear witness to a whole new world. A world where both the wealthy and those on the edge, the young and the older, the powerful and the powerless can share a message of new life and birth together, and work to bring about glimpses of the Kingdom of God. In the inside-out, upside-down world, Elizabeth and Mary still share good news, knowing that the children to come will change not only their lives but the whole of the world. So how could they keep from singing? And how can we? Amen.