

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

God of the gentle, God of the lowly, God who chooses the fragile and vulnerable to be instruments of your will: Lead us to a true simplicity of spirit. Teach us the joy of holding ourselves empty to be filled with wisdom greater than our own. Guide us to a holy fulfillment attained when our dearest purpose in life is to become vessels of your spirit in a broken world.

As Mary chose to give life to your image within her, let us grow into the fullness of your image in us. As Mary was not content to rest complacent in the advent of your miracle, but pondered it in her heart--seeking in it meaning, healing, and the peace which the world could not give--so let us ponder your miracles in our lives, rejoicing that they have been entrusted to us and, through us, to all creation. Amen.

Beloved God, as we wait with Mary in these last days of Advent, eager for the coming birth, fearful at the coming responsibility, remind us that our hearts are worthy homes for your child and inspire us to prepare them. You chose the house of David, little among the thousands of Judah as a lineage. You chose Mary in her lowliness and simplicity as a mother. In such way you have shown us that ordinary people in ordinary places can be instruments of your love made flesh. Beloved God, choose us.

Be with us, fill us. Let us be touched by this season of birth; let us be transformed. Let us emerge blessed by the humility of knowing we are trusted with the fragile, helpless life of any beginning. Let us emerge blessed by the wisdom of knowing that the helpless, the vulnerable, the needy, can teach us as much as the learned, the powerful, the strong. Let us be blessed by the steadfastness of any person who loves another more than self. And let us be blessed to answer "Yes!" with Mary and to accept the abundance of your life within us. Amen.

In preparation for this week's sermon I read the most delightful homily by William Willimon, the erstwhile chaplain of Duke University. He relates how he spent a few months "Down Under"—in Australia and New Zealand—and how that completely discombobulated him: everything was, well, upside down. As far as folks in the southern hemisphere are concerned, their view of the world is right side up, and they simply turn our geographically challenged globes upside down to get a proper orientation. Not only does it get warmer the further *north* one goes (in New Zealand folks refer to the conservative "Deep North"), but most disconcerting of all, Christmas happens in the dead of summer. Now, I ask you, how is anyone supposed to sing the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* when it is a national pastime to spend Christmas day at the beach? So in order to turn Christmas right side up "down" there, they even write their carols differently. I ask you all to turn to hymn 141 in our hymnal, where you will find *Carol Our Christmas*.

Carol our Christmas, an upside-down Christmas:
snow is not falling and trees are not bare.
Carol the summer, and welcome the Christ Child,
warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.

Ah, I can hear Bing Crosby now, "I'm dreaming of a green Christmas."

Sing of the gold and the green and the sparkle,
water and river and lure of the beach.
Sing in the happiness of open spaces,
sing a nativity summer can reach!

Now, in this next stanza they start to make the shift from the parochial to the universal, from the temporal to the eternal. Gwen, can you lead us in singing the next two verses? Just play it through once so we hear the tune. . . .

Shepherds and musterers move over hillside,
finding, not angels, but sheep to be shorn;
Wise ones make journeys, whatever the season,
searching for signs of the truth to be born.

Rightside-up Christmas belongs to the universe,
made in the moment a woman gives birth;
Hope is the Jesus gift, love is the offering,
everywhere, anywhere, here on the earth.

Even here, in this upside down Christmas carol, we see the longing to turn things right side up. For Christmas is a time when we want things turned right side up. We are filled with *emotional* memories where the promise of God's incarnate love rests, if only for a day or two, in our souls. Peace on earth . . . peace in our individual hearts. Christmas is a time when we want everything set right . . . set right side up.

Odd, that. Odd that this is what we so want at Christmas, this-right-side-up,-all's-well-with-the-world holiday. Because that first Christmas was anything but right side up. Jesus was not exactly born into a family-values household. Maybe in our society we are accustomed to out-of-wedlock children, but it was not usual 2,000 years ago in the small village in Nazareth. This was an offense that could get the woman stoned to death at worst, and likely get her thrown out as “unclean” from any and every home at best. This first Christmas turned a teenage girl/woman’s life upside down. And Joseph, engaged to her, resolves to break off his relationship until an angel tells him to hang in there. So *his* life is also turned upside down. In fact, the story is told that when Joseph and Mary showed up in Bethlehem and Joseph tried to get a room at the inn and was told that there was no room, he said, “My wife is pregnant.” The innkeeper replied, “That’s not my fault.” Joseph said, “Well it’s not my fault either!”

And it is not just Mary’s and Joseph’s lives that were turned upside down. The first Christmas did not fit any paradigm of predictable, right side up conventions: The birth is not proclaimed by the media of the day, but by angels in the night; it is not proclaimed to the rulers of the world but to the humblest of the humble of the earth; it is not recognized by the religious leaders of the land, but instead by star-gazing magi from another culture; God incarnate sleeps not in a crib but in a handy feeding trough. . . . “Sing we of Christmas, an upside down Christmas.”

And that is exactly what Mary did: sing of an upside down Christmas. Listen. Listen to the hymn she proclaimed when her world was turned upside down; listen for the Word in the words:

Μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν Κύριον

My soul doth magnify the Lord,

καὶ ἠγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐπὶ τῷ Θεῷ τῷ σωτῆρί μου

and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior. He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Did you listen? Did you hear those subversive words in there? Do you realize how much challenge is in those words to our well ordered world, and how it would change business as usual? Why, they would turn it upside down. Upside down! Oh sure, we celebrate the warm and fuzzy feelings we get at Christmas, but listen to Mary’s hymn, and then think about how Jesus was received by the world once he came into his maturity. This same baby, this same love incarnate, this same one who makes us feel all warm and good inside is the One who got nailed to a tree because his teaching was turning everything upside down. In fact, this is the very charge that society brought against the early church because it was trying concretely to live the teachings of Jesus. In the book of Acts, as they were dragging Jason off to prison his accusers said, and I quote, “These people have been turning the world upside down.” What kind of church is THAT, I ask you? Scripture is filled with some mighty upside down thinking.

Two weeks ago in the service we pondered the incomplete fullness of the Advent paradox as it prepares us for the one who has come/who is yet to come, for the one who is already here/who is not here. And today the lesson draws us deeper into that paradox where the right side up Christmas we long for is met by the upside down logic and love of God. William Willimon said it this way in his Christmas sermon of 1997:

Think of Christmas as a time when God began turning things upside down. And consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, *that's why you are here today*—because your world, right side up, may not be all that it could be. And consider the risk that you take by coming before the babe at Bethlehem. Consider the risk of a right side up world—or at least what we in our Northern Hemispherical prejudice call “right side up”—being turned upside down. Our Bible is full of folk, folk like Mary, who had their world turned upside down, inside out when they came face-to-face with God.¹

I would add to Willimon's words the reminder that when we entered the world at birth, we entered upside down, head first as God filled our lungs with Pneuma, Ruach, Spirit/Breath, breathing love into our souls.

One of the remarkable messages of incarnational theology is the startling reminder that we are created in the image of God, and if that doesn't turn our image of ourselves, and each other, upside down, I don't know what will. You, and the person you like least in this world, are both created in the image and likeness of God. And God is love. We are created in the image of love: that is our deepest humanity, our deepest identity, and THAT is why Christmas turns us upside down because it reminds us that that is who we are expected to be, how we are supposed to behave.

You see, what we are trying to learn here, week after week, is how to change ourselves and live into that image of love. To that end, an upside down Christmas helps us do two things. First it helps us to shed our lives of the debris, of the masks we wear that hide our true image. Sometimes it feels as if God is taking a hammer to the shells we shield ourselves in and is breaking them away to reveal the true us that is hidden underneath. And then, second, we learn here, week after week, how to develop the spiritual muscles of love. Just as the weightlifter's physical image takes on new definition by the development of bodily sinew, so our souls are transfigured as we develop our divine selves into our true image. And as with the weightlifter, that is only done through disciplined practice.

Incarnational theology changes us, everyone, it changes us. It scatters our pride in the imaginations of our hearts and it exalts our humility. Christmas fills our hungry souls with good things as it starves those areas that we mistakenly think should be right side up. We come to the manger expecting to find what we think we are going to find, what we think we always find, only to discover that this cute little baby can, and does, turn our well ordered world upside down.

This, of course, is why our service is upside down today. I know, I know it is disconcerting to have the order of worship—the liturgy—turned around. Any and every time I do something like this I hear from at least one of you. And this time, I ask you, if this has made you

¹ Willimon, William; *Pulpit Resource*; vol. 25, No. 4; 1997; Logos Productions, Inc.; St. Paul; page 49

just the least bit disconcerted or put out or annoyed, then you are getting at least a hint of what it must have been like for Mary, for Joseph, and for everyone who has opened herself to the Word in the words. For liturgy – liturgyia in the Greek, means 'the work of the people.' And this work is to put us in the Way of God so we hear with new ears, see with new eyes and understand with new hearts. Its purpose is not to be comfortable and to pat us on the heads and tell us we are fine just the way we are; that is not divine worship, that is self congratulation. Worship attempts to put us directly in the Way of God; its purpose is remove our masks, work our spiritual muscles, and shape us into the image of love. And that is not always comfortable. Whoever told us that standing in the presence of God is easy? Who ever told us that being visited by angels is comforting? It shakes us up and turns our world upside down. That is what good liturgy does. It puts us in the presence of God and tries to open us to the Word in the words.

So as the spiritual leader of this congregation, I who preach this upside down word for a living, bid you to take heed this Christmas. Take heed as you sing the angels' songs; take heed as you come to adore him; take heed as you bend over this infant incarnation of love, for he may just reach out that gentle hand to you and remove your mask, and reveal you to yourself, and call you to turn your life, and this world, God side up. Amen and amen.