

Scattered in the Thoughts of Our Hearts
D.Min. sermon/liturgical series *Home* Part 2 of 4
Luke 1:26-55; Micah 5:2-5
Advent 4

Micah 5:2-5

²But 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. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And 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; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:26-55

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her,

"Do not be afraid, Mary,
 for you have found favor with God.

³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
 and you will name him Jesus.

³²He will be great,
 and will be called the Son of the Most High,
 and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
 and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be?"

³⁵The angel said to her,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be holy;
he will be called Son of God.

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age
has also conceived a son;
and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me
according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the
hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted
Elizabeth.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb.
And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a
loud cry,

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

⁴³And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

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

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

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

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

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”



Introduction

I was pastoring a congregation with a large and varied music program, and I'd had this idea to ask various groups and soloists within the music program to present each of the six verses of “The First Nowell,” and we'd put the whole thing together, with the congregation singing the refrain every time, as a massive hymn for our Christmas Eve service.

So the congregation sang a verse; the choir harmonized for a verse; the folk band sang a verse; the children's choir; a couple of soloists; an ensemble. And then, to bring the whole thing to a rousing finale, after the last verse we'd sing the refrain as usual, but then we would repeat the refrain one more time, a little louder, to end the whole thing on a resounding high note.

The director stood on a platform in the middle of the sanctuary to be as much ringmaster as conductor.

I was nervous, because with so many people involved, and at that hectic time of year, there was no way to get everybody together to practice the thing, so the first time we would try it all together would be the actual performance in the Christmas Eve service.

The service began and we came to the big hymn. One by one, the verses went by and everybody did an amazing job, and the congregation came in right on cue with the refrain every time. We made it all the way through the final verse and on the way to the big finale.

Knowing we were singing the chorus twice at the end, we held a little bit back the first time we went through it. We were like baseball pitchers, winding up for the big pitch, so we came through the first refrain—“Born is the king of Israel”—and now we’re really ready to let it fly!—and we all took a deep breath to really belt it out one more time—

and the director forgot that we were going to repeat the closing refrain.

I watched in horror as her hands slowed at the end of the first chorus and stopped moving. She got that beatific smile that music directors sometimes get indicating joy and considerable relief that we’d made it all the way through. And I thought, “No! No!” But I couldn’t say anything because I was still, like, wound up for the big pitch, and thinking with every fiber of my being, “Come on! Keep directing!”

All these years later, I still feel like I’ve drawn my breath for the big finale, and...

and I’m still waiting for that big, triumphant finish.

Frederick Buechner didn't know how right he was when he compared Advent to the instant when the conductor raises the baton to start the concert.ⁱ

And while I've shaped my whole understanding of Advent around kind of a serenely joyful anticipation, there is still a feeling that something remains—no, that *so much* remains—unresolved. And the wait becomes more and more agonizing for those of us who believe the teachings of the one whose birth we are about to observe.

We are not just blessedly, patiently waiting in a paradise of perfect worship and universal satisfaction.

We're waiting in the midst of a world situation that remains naggingly unsatisfactory. So much destruction. So much hunger. So much violence. So much cruelty rooted in hatred rooted in fear rooted in selfishness.

So many people, in every country and on every continent, forced, by circumstances or, more often, by other people, from all that they once knew as home.

This Christmas week coincides with the end of what is almost certainly going to end up being the sixth consecutive record-breaking year with the largest numbers in human history of people being pushed out of, or fleeing, their homes.ⁱⁱ

And we're waiting in the midst of our own personal situations that daily challenge our resources of resilience and patience.

We all—I mean I literally believe *all* of us human beings—can find ourselves somewhere in the story of Jesus' birth, with all its beauty and tragedy and miracle. Wherever you see yourself in the great tapestry of the Bethlehem story, I invite you to join me now in prayer.

Prayer

Almighty God,

At this Advent time, as we prepare for the coming of Christ,
surrounded by images and songs that tug on our sentimentality,
immersed in memories of the Christmases
of our childhood and our imagination,
thinking constantly of those
with whom we have shared our warmest Christmastimes,

We remember and lift up all, including those right here around us,
who find themselves, figuratively *or literally*, far from home.

In a world of people displaced from their homes, we pray:

For those who, like the Magi *on the way* to see Jesus,
have set out in search of something holy, something promised,
something that pulls them through the night
to bring their gifts and blessings;
or who, like the Magi *after* having delivered their gifts,
have heeded warnings that they have enemies
who would do them harm
at the highest levels of their own governments,
and so are not safe to return home,
and must find another passage.

We pray for those who, like Joseph,
are trying to deliver their children and their spouses to a country
far away from the gangs and thugs and terrorists
who would, without mercy, take their lives in a heartbeat,
in places where the innocent are killed
and Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be consoled,
because they are no more.

We pray for those who, like Zechariah the father of John the Baptist,
have had their voice taken from them,
and must wait for God to intervene in the world
before they can speak or be heard again.

We pray for those who, like Mary,
are displaced from their own youthful years
by circumstances beyond their control,
who respond to God's invitation
in ways that will change their lives forever.

We pray for those who, like Mary and Joseph,
must follow the dictates of emperors and their bureaucracies
to go and be registered, regardless of their circumstances,
even many months pregnant;
whose circumstances do not conform
to the availability of midwives, hospital beds,
safe lodging or even adequate shelter,
who must bring babies into the world in unclean places
and dank holes
where sophisticated people of greater means
would never be seen.

We pray for those who, like John the Baptist,
have heard the call of God to leave their home
and go into the world of people
to deliver God's word in a new place.

Help us, O God,
to pray with the fervor and faith of those who depend on you
to watch over their treacherous passage,
even and especially when we have had to leave behind
the very places, things and people
who have been the only home we have ever known.

In the name of the Christ
 who voluntarily displaced himself into our world,
 to live on the earth and die on the cross
 and be raised to new life, from which holy place, even now
 he calls us all to turn again home.

Amen.

The Sermon

What did anybody know about these two women?

Deep in the hill country, the very young woman, pregnant under suspicious and literally unbelievable circumstances, arrived at the doorstep of her older relative, Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant herself, despite being described as being “in her old age.”

What did the world know about these two women? What did anybody know about how monumentally important they already were to this unknowing world?

Even they may have just been coming to terms with the magnitude of what God was giving the world in them—and therefore, how breathtakingly important they were.

Maybe through them and the roles they played, humankind will one day, finally, come to understand that every woman, and every human being, everywhere on this earth, is as breathtakingly important to the world as they are to God.

When Mary sings her song to Elizabeth which church tradition has come to call The Magnificat, I find myself especially drawn to two particular things in which Mary rejoices:

That God *has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,*
and has *brought down the powerful from their thrones;*

and that God has looked with favor on Mary's *lowliness*—
it's not "God has looked with favor on *me*,"
but specifically "God has looked with favor *on her lowliness*."

I have seen you, says God,
you who are unseen by the world around you, or when you *are* seen,
you are regarded as "lowly."

Here at the end of the season of preparation for the coming of Christ into our individual lives, and into the world, and into our lives in the world, it may be a good time to reflect on the question that Mary's song seems to raise:

What is your position in this world?

And more specifically: what God would have you do with it?

Mary and Elizabeth, one very young and one "getting on in years,"
women in a world where women had practically no monetary rights
or independent security,
members of a nation whose history and present circumstances
were a redundant narrative of defeat, occupation,
persecution, and hopelessness,
knew what it was like to be unseen.

Even Luke himself, in his role as narrator, refers, two chapters later, to the unborn prophet whom Elizabeth is carrying as "John *son of Zechariah*," blithely overlooking, in accordance with the custom of the day, the woman whose motherhood of John is the true miracle.

And how are they received by the world?

Will Elizabeth and Zechariah be inundated with congratulatory notes and a baby shower? Or will neighbors and strangers alike feel entitled to weigh in on what they think of a woman getting on in years bringing another child into the world—doing the math and questioning the couple’s judgement and fitness to be parents.

Joseph already knows what the world will think about Mary, in her circumstances. Maybe that’s part of why she “made haste” to go into the hill country and stay for three months with her older cousin.

It is reasonable to imagine that Mary and Joseph both understood that their neighborhood is not likely to continue to be a hospitable home where they are welcome to be who they are and receive the blessings that God gives them.

And Mary rejoiced that the Lord, at least, looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant.

Meanwhile, she sings,
*God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,
 and has brought down the powerful from their thrones.*

And who are these “proud”—in Greek *ὑπερήφανος* (*uperephanos*)—proud, arrogant, disdainful; haughty?
 And who are these “powerful,” the *δυνάστης* (*dunastés*), whom God brings down from their thrones?

English translations have traditionally used the words “powerful” or “mighty;” in fact the Greek word specifically means *rulers*, particularly those who rule *by force*—the kinds of rulers who had been occupying, dominating, tormenting and exploiting Mary’s people for centuries.

For those of us who do have a certain amount of power in this world—whether as a result of our demographics, or the country into which we were born, or the *circumstances* into which we were born, or the

finances we've accumulated, or the political influence we've amassed, or the social standing we have attained—

it's kind of a relief to know that Mary is prophesying about God bringing down *a particular kind* of powerful person from their thrones: evil rulers, dictators, despots.

And we can breathe a sigh of relief that, according to Mary's hymn, God's justice-bearing power—and, apparently, desire—to knock somebody down a few rungs isn't focused on all of us just because we have some power, but on a particular *kind* of powerful person.

Jerks, mostly. We're not jerks; we're nice people who mean well and, frankly, work hard and do a lot of good in the world.

But we do have our royal thrones—access to levers of considerable power. And the question remains: what will we do with the power we have, the positions we occupy?

As we prepare to properly observe and celebrate this Christmas, I say enjoy your dearest loved ones; bask in your home; be outwardly thankful for any privileges of plenty that you are able to enjoy. Feast and sing and celebrate and be happy and love: love Jesus, love the world, love your neighbor, love your enemy, love yourself.

And then consider the lowly:

The homeless in our community and in our country;
 the 68.5 million forced from their homes
 by war and terror and gang violence
 and collapsed economies and brutal dictators
 and treacherous neighbors and unremitting famines.

They walk and they pray and they cry and they beg for mercy; they endure the insults and indignities and remain susceptible to political

machinations put in place by state agencies answerable to people of Christian conscience like you and me.

What is God inviting you to do to participate in God's project of lifting up the lowly?

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 who has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant...
 who has lifted up the lowly;
 who has filled the hungry with good things...”

May my soul, and yours, magnify the Lord.

Will you bow with me as I share a prayer by the preeminent Reformed theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth?

Lord, may you now let us this year once more approach
 the light, celebration, and joy of Christmas Day
 that brings us face to face with the greatest thing there is:
 your love, with which you so loved the world
 that you gave your only Son,
 so that all of us may believe in him
 and therefore not be lost, but may have eternal life.

What could we possibly bring and give to you?
 So much darkness in our human relationships
 and in our own hearts!
 So many confused thoughts, so much coldness and defiance,
 so much carelessness and hatred!
 So much over which you cannot rejoice,
 that separates us from one another and certainly cannot help us!
 So much that runs directly against the message of Christmas!

What should you possibly do with such gifts?

And what are you to do with such people as we all are?

But all of this is precisely what you want to receive from us
and take from us at Christmas—
the whole pile of rubbish and ourselves, just as we are—
in order to give us in return Jesus, our Savior,
and in him a new heaven and a new earth,
new hearts and a new desire,
new clarity and a new hope for us and for all people....

Be among us as we once again...together
prepare to receive him as your gift!
Make it so that we may rightly speak, hear, and pray,
in proper, thankful amazement
about everything that you have in mind for all of us,
that you have already decided regarding all of us,
and that you have already done for all of us!”ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 2.

ⁱⁱ UNHCR video 2017 Global Trends Report

ⁱⁱⁱ Karl Barth, “Advent: Your Gift to Receive,” in *Fifty Prayers*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.