

Year C Advent 4 Standing in Two Worlds Luke 1 39 to 55

Two pregnant women get together today for a visit and their conversation is recorded. Since the Bible formed over the years in a male dominated society, to be focusing nearly exclusively on two women for a significant chunk of the Gospel, tells us that what we have just heard is extremely important.

Here we are on the final Sunday of Advent, going back in time to when John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus were both still snug in their mothers' bellies. It may seem like Luke is just simply reminding us of the birth announcement. But it is much more than that. In today's Gospel, Luke – through the words and actions of both Mary and Elizabeth – is telling us once again that the “Great Leveling” is coming and we are given a lot of detail that tells us what kind of a God it is who loves us and the rest of creation.

Our God turns the ways of the world upside-down. God's salvation of the world is a salvation by reversal – a reversal of ingrained worldly thinking – and today we see two prime examples of this in Mary and in Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is an old lady. Not only is she old, she has no children – and not from a lack of trying. She and her husband have been unable to have children but then God steps in, tells her she will get pregnant and she gets pregnant. God doesn't do this to show off. God does this – causes an old couple to suddenly face the joy of having a child – because having a child in old age is a sign of God's love and abundance, a sign of the perfection to come. God does not need to play by the world's rules: with God and in God's kingdom, all things are possible.

God chooses an old, childless woman – a woman who is, therefore, thought of with scorn by the rest of that society – God chooses this woman to bear the child who

will grow into a great prophet – the prophet who will prepare the way for the Messiah. And when this prophet, still in his mother’s belly, encounters the Messiah, he does a little flip of acknowledgement inside Elizabeth. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth realizes what has just occurred and loudly proclaims the news. When I say “loudly”, I mean “loudly.” The phrase in Greek means to shout as though one is using a mega-phone, literally a “big” or “mega” voice. This is how Elizabeth speaks a prophetic word to Mary, and so to us — in her outdoor voice. Elizabeth tells us that Mary’s baby is the world’s Messiah and Mary is blessed because she believed this when the angel Gabriel told her so.

Mary *is* blessed but not in the world’s way of thinking...This is another example of God’s salvation by reversal – turning the world upside-down. Mary was lowly – and lowly here means “dirt poor”. As a pregnant, unwed mother, Mary was, at best, thinking she was going to be dumped by her fiancé Joseph who was not the baby’s father and, at worst, she knew she would be scorned, shamed, possibly killed. But she is blessed. To be blessed is to be invited by God to participate in his purpose for us and for all of creation. We cannot – and should not – count on being “blessed” with health and wealth and happiness. Those are the world’s ideas of blessings and we are seeing, yet again today, that God’s ways do not align with the world’s ways. God’s rewards are not our rewards. Often, like Mary and like Elizabeth, we must be able to see through the dark veil of hardships that the broken world has dealt – poverty, old age and childlessness, pregnancy outside of marriage, both women would lose their sons to murder. Yet, both women feel blessed. Elizabeth is blessed with the child who will grow into a great prophet, blessed with a visit from the mother of the Lord. Mary is blessed with the child who will redeem all of creation.

And Mary proclaims this blessing, like Elizabeth, with her outdoor voice. Her soul magnifies the Lord, her spirit rejoices in God the Saviour. From her innermost being, from her very core, to the outward proclaiming, every ounce of her is giving glory to God. And, as she gives glory, what she says is crucial. Mary is announcing how God has saved the world, how God has healed all of the brokenness, and brought perfection. There are two things to notice about Mary's song. First, she is speaking of the past – God has accomplished all of these things she lays out for the world's redemption. And, second, the redemption she lays out is the ultimate reversal of the way things are – the extreme triumph of God's Salvation by reversal.

It is a reversal of the world's thinking about power and weakness. The proud and the rich will be brought down and the lowly will be lifted up. Let's be clear. Not all rich people are bad people. Not all poor people are good people. God is addressing the attitude – the hearts – of the people. The "rich" are those who strive for wealth, who cling to their wealth rather than to God, and who push other people down in order to get more wealth and keep it. The "poor" are the people who are the victims of this lust for wealth. The poor are the ones who do not have quite enough, the ones whose hands always seem to be tied by bureaucratic red tape that favours those with the power. The poor are the ones looked upon as "lesser than" because they don't have status and wealth according to the world's version of status and wealth.

We, in fact, live with one leg in each of those extremes – the rich and the poor. In the grand scheme of things, we are considered wealthy. If asked what we need for security, many people would answer, "Food, clothes, and shelter, enough money to get by" rather than putting God at the top of the list. We are also, in some sense,

the poor because we are not the top dogs, we are not the ones with great power. We often feel at the mercy of larger institutions and corporations.

Having one leg in each category – both rich and poor – puts us in a rather awkward position. It causes us to wonder what will be our fate when this Great Leveling occurs? We will be the ones brought down? Will we be the ones raised up?

This dilemma brings up another piece of God's Salvation by reversal. This time, it is a reversal of our thinking about salvation itself. We have grown up in a society that highly values the individual – individual thinking, individual acts – we are in a “me first,” it's all about my needs sort of world. This affects the way in which we think about salvation – as long as I am in good standing with God, that's what counts. Mary's song lets us know that this individual way of thinking about salvation will absolutely not work in God's kingdom. Her song tells us that salvation is not a “me” thing. It is a “we” thing. Her song speaks of groups of people, not individuals. Why? Because we do not live as isolated individuals. Our actions, our words, and even the way we think impact the world around us and the other people around us. God's purpose for the world, the purpose that will bring about the fullness of God's kingdom, is that people will live in right relationship with God, with each other, and with creation. Jesus' summary of all God's laws did not end with “Love God.” Jesus commanded us to love God and neighbour. That is why the Scriptures are full of group images to describe us – we are Jesus' flock of sheep, the branches on the vine, the stones that build God's temple, the various body parts with Jesus as the head. God's kingdom is full of other people. God's kingdom is creation. If we are not in right relationship with others and with creation then we are not living in God's kingdom.

Realizing that salvation is not just a “me” thing means acknowledging that we do stand with one leg in the world of the poor, one leg in the world of the rich – one leg in God’s kingdom, one leg in the world’s. We are interconnected with the world – the good and the bad. So, are we doomed? Last week we heard about the wheat and the chaff and know we are a mixture of good and bad. Not one of us is perfect. When God comes again, what needs to be brought down, will be brought down. What needs to be lifted up will be lifted up – the Great Leveling will occur. That does not mean we sit back and wait for that to happen because we were also clearly told last week that we must bear fruits worthy of repentance.

If we know we have a leg in the world of the rich and the proud, we turn to Jesus to find out what we can do to pull that leg out of that world as much as we can and, at the same time, heal that world as much as we can because we are all “in it together.” Jesus ate and drank with the outcasts and the sinners; he touched those whom society was afraid to touch. He loved everyone, welcomed everyone, saw everyone as equals. Jesus doesn’t command us to *help* others, he commands us to *love* others. We are called to love the unloveable, to welcome the unwelcome, we are called to be different than our general society. We can transform the world with God’s help.

“Mary’s song is not first sung by priests or scribes, not even by Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father. Perhaps that’s because, ironically, for so many of us “religious folk,” familiarity *with* the holy can result sometimes in numbness *to* the holy, or perhaps reinforce our own satisfaction with the way things are.

Thus, as Tom Long observed, ‘The song of God’s power and promises fulfilled is first chanted by human lips not in Senate or sanctuary, palace or prayer house; but rather in a place the world would count for nothing: a conversation between two

women, Mary and Elizabeth, facing their pregnancies. The song of God's power and promises fulfilled breaks out in a conversation about stretch marks and swollen ankles, sung by an unmarried, pregnant peasant girl.'

The song of the gospel, which will one day fill the earth with its power, first sounds in the weak and helpless places earnestly yearning for it the most, among those ready to believe and cherish it in the very depths of their being. The places of weakness in our lives and in this world are most open to the world-turning intrusion of God's presence.

Yes, Mary's Song is revolutionary, indeed. So, empires and powers beware! Mary is singing, and the world is about to turn" (Jay Koyle, Cathedral Update).

Being the Body of Christ – the Church – together is crucial to working toward God's purpose, making a reality of God's salvation by reversal. Together we are stronger, better, more courageous than we are as individuals. Together we are able to do what we are unable to do alone. Salvation is a "we" thing. Like Mary, we are blessed – not with health and wealth and happiness. Like Mary, we are blessed because we have been called to participate in God's purpose. Like Mary, we bear Christ within us – the kingdom of God is revealed to us so that we may reveal it to the world.

Jesus lived a life that showed Mary's words to be true. Let us do the same.