

“Joyous Reversals”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46-55

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Third Advent

“Wow! I did not expect that!” Whether a news story on television, the ending of a novel, an announcement at work, or a conversation at a family dinner, we sometimes come away saying, “Wow! I did not expect that!”

This morning, our two lessons offer reversals from the expected. In Isaiah 35, there is a reversal in the created order as the exiled people of Israel envision the highway home. I have spoken before of today’s refugee crisis being a parallel to Israel’s exile. Often politicized with fear, it is easy to lose sight of the human tragedy, and that most refugees hope for a road home, the way the people of Israel did over twenty-five centuries ago.

As they look homeward, Isaiah envisions joyous surprises lining the road. A normally barren wilderness will bring forth blooms and the dangerously hot desert will have water. Natural predators – jackals and lions – will be removed as threats along the highway, called the Holy Way, home. People with disabilities of sight, hearing or speech, either from birth or inflicted by their captors, will be healed, cured, made whole.

Let us listen for the reversals from what is expected in Isaiah 35:1-10:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Some tantalize you with an image; others excite you with a segment of a car chase; still others humor you with a quip, or intrigue you with an unanswered question. I am talking about previews that seek to entice you to watch a movie or TV show, without revealing so much that you know the ending.

In such a way, Mary's Song, known as Mary's Magnificat, is a preview of God's coming attraction. We are just in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel when Mary sings it. The story has moved along in real time, and we have been introduced to real people. The angel Gabriel has announced births to both Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, and to Mary. The soon-to-be mother of Jesus has just made a seventy mile trek to see her cousin Elizabeth, the soon-to-be mother of John the Baptist. We don't know who accompanied Mary; perhaps she simply called an Uber donkey to give her a lift. Upon entering Zechariah and Elizabeth's house, Mary's greeting prompts John to leap in Elizabeth's womb, leading to Elizabeth's pronouncement of a famous blessing on Mary. "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

A lot has happened in 45 verses. Then Luke pushes the pause button. Sometimes, we do so to catch our breath, or to go back over the flurry of activity, but Luke is stopping his narrative so Mary can sing. Yet, this is not just an interlude to entertain, but Luke is pausing the narrative to offer an understanding, a meaning of what will take place in the rest of his Gospel.

Put another way, Mary's Song offers a table of contents of the themes Luke will use in telling his readers of the truth of Jesus' life. During the past year, when Luke was our primary Gospel text, we heard how Jesus cautioned the rich and confronted the proud, and challenged the powerful. In so doing, Jesus also uplifted the lowly, those on the margins, gave hope to the oppressed, and told good news to the poor through parables, healings and simply sitting down with them at a meal.

Mary will begin her song with the joy she feels for God's choosing her, a lowly servant; lowly, not meaning humble and meek, but as one on the margins of society. Then she will envision and celebrate the ways of God in reversing human norms that conflict with God's desires.

Luke 1:46-55, a pause for us to hear the meaning of what is taking place in Jesus' birth, and his life.

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor 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 forever.'

During my years at seminary, just before Lent, I would join other students in organizing a “Feast of Fools” event, with food, fun and the crowning of the king and queen of fools. As I recall, the Feast of Fools, had roots in the Middle Ages, when for a day, the roles of those within the church would be reversed, turned upside down, with a mock bishop or pope elected and high and low officials reversing places. The served became the servants and the servants the served. For us, it was simply a time for students to make fun of the powers that be – seminary faculty or administrators were prime targets, though aim was also taken at classmates we believed exuded an air of arrogance, pride, or aloofness over us common students. There was a degree of no holds barred humor and sarcasm allowed, though I expect it was toned down for professors who would, the following day, again have the power of grading us.

For me, there is a bit of glee and joy in such times of reversal. Turning the tables on the powerful, reversing roles with the privileged, sticking it to the elites, and shaming the proud can elicit a certain joy for those watching the squirming, anger or embarrassment caused by the turning, reversing, sticking and shaming.

The fact is, we can hear Mary’s Magnificat as a turn the tables, stick it to them declaration.

The imagery is there – *scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, sending the rich away empty*. I have probably preached that sermon in past years, but now I think that might be too easy a theme.

Still, I am hesitant to ease the tension of Mary’s song, of the divine reversal. I see a danger of apathy when the threat of God’s overturning of the high and mighty is muted or ignored as simply poetry. Yet, Mary is not so much singing a revolutionary rallying call for human action, but declaring God’s action “against those who take power in their own hands.” [Green, Joel, Luke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1997), p. 100]

Hearing Mary’s song causes us to recall how throughout Scripture God delights in the uplifting of the lowly – which again, means people living on society’s margins. God also delights in the nourishment of the hungry, and that day when the poor have the dignity of having the basics of food, shelter, clothing, and medical care.

Yet, Mary’s song was sung because God’s delight was not reality then, and it continues to be sung today. Mary’s song is a warning to any who would stand in the way, even block, the rights and dignity God accords to all people. God’s reason to scatter the proud, to bring down the powerful and to send the rich away empty is because they are impeding the vision becoming reality, perhaps because they see it as a threat to what they enjoy.

The joyous reversal for God is, in fact, not in having the poor have food and plenty and the rich none, but for all to have what they need. It is not for the lowly to become powerful but for the powerful to make room for shared power. The scattering of the proud is a call to recognize privilege is something we accord ourselves, often, mistakenly, calling it a blessing from God. Mary’s song is a leveling, not a flipping, declaring God advocates for the lowly and hungry, but does not grant privilege or ordain exceptionalism that would allow any race, gender, nation, or religion to act superior to or exert control over another.

In her biblical commentary, Sharon Ringe portrays Mary's Magnificat as encompassing the meaning and nature of God's mercy, God's grace. She writes, "Within the frame of God's mercy, the center loses any tone of vengeance or triumphalism. Instead an economy marked by scarcity and competition is replaced by an economy of generosity in which all have enough. Those who are hungry get to enjoy good things, and those who are rich do not get to add to their riches. [In Mary's song,] the powerful no longer get to exercise power over others, but nothing is said about the 'lowly' now getting to do what has been done to them." [Ringe, Sharon, Luke, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1995) p. 35.]

As I ponder this, I know it is true, that God seeks a leveling, an equality, but if we water down the scattering of the proud, the bringing down of the powerful, the sending away of the rich, are we not talking about amnesty? Are we not letting off the hook the very ones who may have contributed to poverty, hunger and oppression? And are we not also removing ourselves from those ways in which we live as the proud, the powerful, the rich and privileged as if it is God's blessing on us? Yes and no. Yes, it is amnesty if we fail to recognize the full power of grace as a call to radical change. It is not amnesty if we take in Mary's song.

I admit I hear Mary's song with a bit of anxiety, for even if I do not acknowledge myself to be powerful and proud, privileged and rich – which I am all four to varying degrees – but even if I do not acknowledge it, I know I stand in the way of the God reversals of which Mary sings, and Isaiah writes. It is called sin, but there is even good news and a joyous invitation in Mary's song for any who oppose God's reversals.

As one writer puts it, "God's triumph over those who oppose him is itself a redemptive act, [repeat] placing God's opponents in a position whereby they may elect to join God's project." [Boff, as quoted by Green, op. cit., p. 102]

I like that image of joining God's project, of going down and walking with those along Isaiah's highway called the Holy Way, of finding ways to offer God's water to the thirsty and food to the hungry. When we dare walk the way of those who sorrow and sigh, we are given the grace to recognize the triviality of much of what we thought most important. We may have experienced glee and joy in sticking it to the high and mighty, but that is an empty joy. By grace, we begin to sense the glee and joy of reversals, rejoicing at seeing others made whole when, as in Isaiah's vision, *the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.* That's God's project of joyous reversal, and may we accept the invitation to join in.