

MESSENGER OF JOY

Luke 1:46-55

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The choice couldn't have been more unexpected. For the story to revolve around a young unmarried girl, in the obscure village of Nazareth? No one could have imagined it or predicted it.

Nazareth was a small village of about 1500 people in Jesus' time, mentioned nowhere in the Old Testament or other ancient writings.

Yet the story starts there. There in Nazareth with a young woman. Reflecting back on her life, and on the impact of Jesus on the world, Luke remembers the song of another woman, a woman named Hannah. We find her song in the Old Testament book of Samuel. Hannah pleaded with God; she desperately wanted to have a child. Hannah becomes pregnant at an improbable age, gives birth to a son named Samuel, and takes him to the temple where she sings a song of praise to God and promises that her son Samuel will spend his life in God's service. She sings of a God who does the impossible, a God who hears the cries of the oppressed, a God who will reverse fortunes.

Hannah's song echoes in the words Mary sings, for once again the impossible has happened. Whereas Hannah begged for a baby, the appearance of this baby causes chaos in Mary's life. Her engagement to Joseph is in jeopardy. When the angel first brings her the news, Mary asks, "How can this be?" And the angel says, "Nothing is impossible with God."

So Mary begins to believe in a God who does improbable, even impossible things.

She sings a song about a God who turns the world upside down, a God who brings down the powerful from their thrones.

It is a song so potentially subversive and politically dangerous that it has actually been banned — in places in south and central America in the 1980's and in British-ruled India during colonial times. Authorities worried it might incite oppressed people to riot.

When Luke's readers heard these words, "he has brought down the powerful from their thrones," they knew this wasn't some generic reference. This is a song about Herod the Great, a name he gave himself, by the way. He'd also been named King of the Jews by the Roman Senate decades earlier.

Many of Jesus' stories were about people like Mary and her family, people who were peasants and serfs. Herod grew wealthy off their poverty.

I recently heard this story about King Herod, a story that reveals just how cruel and heartless he was. He knew people would be ecstatically happy when he died, so he supposedly had 70 elite Jewish citizens imprisoned with orders that they be executed on the day of his death. Why? So that there would be tears in Israel, so that at least people would cry on the day of his death.

Herod was a terrible person but a brilliant politician. He watched other leaders come and go; he outlasted, outsmarted, outmaneuvered and outfoxed them all.

Then one day magi came to Jerusalem and asked: "Where is the one who has been born 'King of the Jews'?"

King Herod heard this, and was disturbed. Meanwhile, Mary, meek and mild, said:

He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts,

He has brought down rulers from their thrones...

[He has] sent the rich away empty.

It appears from the gospel texts that only two people understood just how subversive this little life would be: the most powerful man in the country, and a powerless, penniless, illiterate Jewish peasant girl.

To one of them, the coming of Jesus was the foundation of desperate hope; to the other it was a catastrophe to be prevented at all costs.

There is a pattern to her song:

He has brought down the ruler, but lifted up the humble;

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

Scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, but been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

God is reversing everything: who is in, who's out; who's up, who's down. Who the winners are; who the losers are.

The world said: blessed are the beautiful. Blessed are the rich. Blessed are the successful. Blessed are the secure. Blessed is Herod. Mary said that God's

going to turn everything upside down. Why would anyone listen to an unimportant peasant girl?

Then a rabbi came along and he too sang the strangest song: “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the meek.” Where did he get his material? Could it have been from his mom? Did he learn from her that God has no intention of tolerating the injustice and greed of this world on a permanent basis? Did she teach him that it angers God when people are selfish or violent, when rich people watch poor people go hungry and do nothing, when the powerful push around the weak because they can get away with it?

The rabbi wouldn't overthrow Herod by using Herod's methods. He wouldn't out-Herod Herod. He would out-love Herod and defeat Herod's capacity to hate by his greater capacity to love and suffer. He would humble himself—be born in a stable, grow up in poverty and work with his hands. He would teach wherever people would listen. God would turn everything upside down, and it would all start on the bottom of the pile with little Mary. And her baby.

But there's an elephant in the room, isn't there? It's been 2000 years and it hasn't happened. The gap between the rich and the poor is still there, aching wide. Peace and justice are not yet realities. The world has not been turned upside down.

And so, we who are people of faith and hope, we who are Advent people, people who wait, we keep on singing Mary's song. We keep on, telling of God's priorities. God does want to fill the hungry, God does want the rich to know that their striving for things leaves them empty. And it is a song that we sing not just with words but with our

actions. And when we live in service to these words, to these priorities, to these values, we find joy.

We want God to shake up our world, to shake us up, to turn us upside down, to remind us of what's real and of what really matters. Shake us up when we live as if we think that material possessions are going to bring us joy. Shake us up when we think only of ourselves and our own pleasure and comfort. Shake our world upside down when we worship the rich and the powerful, the celebrity and the athlete. Let us shine instead the light of God's star on the nurses, the social workers, the special ed teachers. Let us thank those who work with our children and our elderly. Let us notice those who collect our garbage and drive our ambulances and shovel our snow. Let us admire those who have little but give much.

I don't know when we have needed it as much as we need it now - we need God to shake us hard like a snow globe until we see our world the way God sees it. As a fragile environment that needs protection, filled with people who are vulnerable and in need of love and care. Everyone one of us.

What can you and I do to give birth to the world God has in mind for us? We do it one day at a time, one action at a time, one word at a time. We do it by living with compassion and humility and joy.

Last summer, Doug and I went to Blossom to hear Yo-Yo Ma play Bach's six suites for cello. He plays them, unaccompanied, and without any sheet music in front of him. He plays for 2 1/2 hours. On the screen the camera gives you a close-up of his face, his fingers. You are amazed by his mind, his dexterity, the feeling he evokes from

those strings. And the joy that is on his face. He is performing these cello suites in 36 cities in 6 countries. Each concert is followed by a day of community service.

After he played a concert in Vermont and did a day of community service, he went by himself to a small restaurant. It was a small enough room that a few of the diners began conversing with each other. The topic of work came up. Two women at one table, who clearly did not recognize him, asked him what he did for a living. "I play the cello," he said, and then the conversation moved on and they discussed food and travel. After he left, the waiter told the two women that they had been talking to the world-famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma. An extraordinary man of humility and joy.

This Christmas season, draw near to the manger scene. Read again the song of the mother who gave birth to the child who turned the world upside down. Enter into the spirit of humility and joy.

Some quotes from John Ortberg, "Mary's Carol," Christian Century