“Life in Reverse”

Advent 4C-21

Luke 1: 26-33, 38a, 39-42, 46-55

12/19/21

Prayer for Illumination

Luke 1: 26-33, 38a, 39-42, 46-55

“Life in Reverse”

What a gift that was. I’m grateful for that beautiful, unique proclamation of Luke’s first chapter. Really, it deserves a unique proclamation because… well… the whole first chapter of Luke is so beautiful and unique.

So unique some might even call it… absurd. Don’t get me wrong. It’s beautiful. But when you read this text within the framework of the real world… our world… it seems a bit more than strange, doesn’t it?

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Here’s a quick synopsis:

A old, childless woman named Elizabeth conceives a son when, clearly, she shouldn’t have been able to. An angel makes clear… the child is to be named John… and he will be a prophet of God.

Elizabeth’s relative, a very young, teenage virgin named Mary, also conceives a son when, clearly, she shouldn’t have been able to. The angel tells her that her child is to be named Jesus, son of God.

Mary’s understandably perplexed, “I’m a virgin. This can’t be?”

“Of course it can,” the angel replied. “Your relative Elizabeth was thought to be barren, but she’s now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.”

Mary accepts the angel’s invitation, telling the angel, “Tell God I said yes.”

She then goes to visit her relative, Elizabeth, whose baby somersaults in her womb as she sees Mary approaching. Elizabeth is overwhelmed that Mary has come to see her, proclaiming, “Who am I, that the mother of my Lord has come to visit me?” she asks. “You are blessed, Mary, for believing, and trusting.”

That is all the affirmation Mary needs, as she bursts out in song. Of course, the pages of Scripture don’t have music notes in them, but make no mistake, Mary’s words in vs. 46-55 are a song she sings out “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

We call it the “Magnificat,” the Latin word for magnify, as Mary sings for joy for all that God is doing to her and through her.

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It’s beautiful, to be sure. But it’s also, admittedly, absurd when viewed within the framework of our world. Because we should be honest with ourselves.

* Barren women don’t conceive. And neither do virgins.
* The poor aren’t blessed or favored… the wealthy and affluent are blessed. We all know that.
* And good heavens. Babies don’t rule the world. Rich, powerful people rule the world from the halls of governments and the boards of big corporations.

Which can make Luke’s telling of God’s incarnation—of God’s birth into the world—*more* than hard to believe.

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But I also think that may be the point. I think that may be why Luke, of all the Gospel authors, is so insistent on beginning his Gospel with these details the other gospels leave out.

As if Luke is trying to show us, right from the start, that our ways aren’t just different from God’s… our ways are flat-out backwards. As if we’ve taken the way of life God intends and turned it upside down and inside out. As if we’re living life… in reverse.

As if we’re living *life in reverse*… and God has come to show us how to start moving forward.

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Let’s look at the reversals.

Reversal One—Power is not found in might… but in the ability to be vulnerable.

The mere fact that our all-powerful God would choose to enter the world in the all-vulnerable form of a baby is evidence enough of this.

But so is Mary. A vulnerable teenager asked to bear God’s child into the world. We often think of Mary as meek… and mild… which she may have been. But that’s not why Mary said “yes.” She didn’t say “yes” to bearing God into the world because she was weak… or because she was afraid.

Mary said “yes” to God because she was strong. Powerful enough to be vulnerable. Powerful enough to step into something new. Powerful enough to follow her faith regardless of what the world around her surely said.

That’s the first reversal—power is not found in might… but in the ability to be vulnerable.

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Reversal Two—Worth is not found in wealth or affluence… accomplishments or influence. Worth is found in love and grace that God offers in endless supply.

The mere fact that God chose Mary—a penniless, powerless girl to bear God into the world is evidence enough of this.

But so is Elizabeth. The matriarch of the family. The one who, societally speaking, was above and before her young relative, Mary. But did you notice Elizabeth’s response when Mary came to see her? Elizabeth was the one who was humbled. Elizabeth was the one crying out in celebration, wondering aloud how she could be so honored that this teenage mother of her Lord would pay her a visit.

That’s the second reversal—this world’s understanding of worth… which cannot be found in wealth or affluence… accomplishments or influence. Worth can only be found in the love and grace God offers in endless supply.

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Reversal Three—This is the most subtle… but also, perhaps, the most significant. God’s plan of salvation is *not* individualistic. It’s communal.

Mary’s song, the Magnificat, vs. 46-55, details this reversal in amazing ways. Listen again to the beginning of her song.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

Here… Mary is praising God for her blessings… for what God has done *to* her and *for* her.

But keep listening, because she’s not done singing.

*His mercy is for those who fear him…*

*He has shown strength ith his arm…*

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

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

*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.”*

There’s a movement here from the personal to the communal. The movement from what God is doing for Mary… to what God is doing through Mary.

A movement that seems flat out reverse in a world that still teaches us to put ourselves first. But Mary celebrates the reversal… as God uses her as a vessel to help bring salvation to the world.

* Salvation seen amid a world where the high and the low would meet in the middle.
* Salvation seen amid a world where the have’s have less so the have-nots can have some.
* Salvation amid a world where both sinners and saints are able to sit at table together in the kingdom of God, which her child was coming to reveal to the world.

This third reversal is perhaps the hardest for the Greater Church to see… as some Christian traditions believe that the whole point of faith is individualistic salvation. As if the point of faith is to believe in Christ in order to get into heaven when you die.

But that’s just not the Biblical witness to why Jesus came in the first place. As Mary’s Magnificat so beautifully reveals… God’s plan has always been communal salvation. Yes… individually we are a part of this plan. But God didn’t just come to bless us individually. God came in order to use us as vessels for turning the ways of this world around… that we might start moving towards ways of God’s kingdom… a kingdom in which nations really do beat their swords into plowshares… in which predators really do turn their spears into pruning hooks.

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But there we go again… talking about the absurd.

To think that nations really might turn their billion dollar weapons built to destroy into agricultural tools meant to nourish.

But Luke makes no bones about it. He wants us to hear from the very first chapter that while the good news Christ came to reveal sounds absurd… seems backwards… seems to move in reverse of what this world teaches… it is, nonetheless, the good news of God came to proclaim in Jesus Christ.

* Power isn’t found in might… but in vulnerability.
* Worth isn’t found in wealth or affluence… accomplishments or influence. Worth is found in the love and grace God offers in endless supply.
* And the blessings we know from our relationship with God… the best that we are and the best that we have… it’s not meant just for us… Rather, we can be the very means by which God is still working out the salvation of the world.

Salvation that can be found even here, even now, Advent insists, if we start moving in the right direction. A direction that can seem absurd… backwards even.

But it’s the way of life Christ lived, and calls us to live.

It’s a way the Gospel simply calls “peace.”

Amen.