

Date: 12/19/21

A World Turned Upside Down

Texts: **Micah 5: 2-5a**; **Luke 1:39-55**; Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*

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Or, turned the right way around, *I'm not going to be doing this whole sermon backwards, just this sentence.*

"But why?" you are saying to yourselves as you scratch your heads, "Why on earth are you starting out the sermon with this incomprehensible gibberish? Not, of course, that we don't find all of your sermons incomprehensible gibberish at times, but this really takes the cake!" Yes, I can hear your thoughts! I know what you are saying in your heads, "Why would you do that, Pastor Poopy Pants? Why would you begin with confusion, and ramp it up to insults, Rev. Ripsnort? We knew you were a little crazy, but you really are the Minister of Madness today! No good can come from asking, of that we're sure, but we'll ask anyway: why? Why? WHY? Why are you doing this?" Well, I'm glad you asked that, my friends, though I take a little exception to the name calling you used there at the end! That was a bit much!

But there is reason in the madness! It is a recreation of a Christmas time tradition from the Middle Ages called the Feast of Fools. It was a feast that was never fully approved of by the authorities, and often it was suppressed, but that was part of the point. You see, the Feast of Fools celebrates turning the world on its head! During the Feast, the authorities were mocked, and license was given to underlings to make fun of their superiors. Conventional behavior was flipped, and those who were on top were suddenly on the bottom. The feast featured men dressing up as women and women dressing up as men; it featured people wearing masks and pretending to be animals. In the church, foul-smelling incense was burned, and sometimes a mock bishop or even pope was elected, and then made fun of, being made to ride on a donkey and spout gibberish instead of the liturgy. It was a rollicking good time, unless you were one of the authorities being made fun of, in which case you were outraged while it was going on, and delighted when it was over. The next day everything would return to normal and the hierarchy would be restored. The people on top were back on top, and the people on the bottom were back on the bottom.

But why did they do such a crazy thing? Were they stir crazy from a northern winter? Were they drunk a little early on Christmas wine? No! While the origins are obscure, most likely they did it because of the Virgin Mary and her song, the Magnificat, which we heard this morning! That's why this is all happening around Christmas time. "What?" you're now saying to yourselves, "People acted all crazy because of that stately, magnificent, wonderful song that Mary sang? At Christmas time? Say again? What?"

What indeed! That stately, magnificent, wonderful song that we intone with such honor and dignity – so much honor and dignity that it's almost boring to have to listen to it – that song talks about turning the world upside down! "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones," Mary sings, "and lifted up the lowly!" Wow, that's not stately, that's subversive! That's revolutionary! That is a revolt in the making! "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty!" And *that* is not just magnificent and wonderful, that is pure fantasy! The poor have good

things, and the rich find their bank accounts empty! That is never going to happen! And if it did, the world would truly be upside down.

But that's what Mary sings! That's what she thinks God is going to do with the baby inside her womb! She's so certain it's going to happen that she sings it in the past tense, as if it had already happened!

And that's what they were doing at the Feast of Fools! They're pretending that Mary's prophetic song has been fulfilled! They're pretending that the world really has been turned on its head, if only just for one day of the year. Back then, they lived in a world where most people worked and slaved so that a few people could live in carefree luxury. Back then, they lived in a world not much changed from the one Mary lived in, where palaces and cathedrals and gated mansions housed untold wealth, while the poor outside the doors got a pittance for their pain. Jesus told the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus – about a beggar in the street outside a rich man's door – to describe such a world for us. But that is the world that these people are making fun of, that is the world these people are turning upside down for the Feast, and that is the world Mary's song says God will upend.

Of course, the authorities hated it, because they were afraid that that *one day* might turn into *every day*, might turn into *forever*, and that the disrespect of those in power might lead people to think that maybe it was time to have Mary's song fulfilled in reality, instead of just in burlesque. But for the poor and the hungry, for the powerless and the lowly, it was their one chance to dream big and to put their hope in the God who promised that one day everyone would have enough to eat, and no one would be one up, or a hundred up, or a thousand up, or a billion up on anyone else, but all would share fairly in the goodness of God's kingdom.

Now, you might think they're pushing things too far, taking a few verses from Mary's song like that, and turning them into a whole Feast Day. But as far as Luke is concerned, they're not wrong. Luke's gospel is good news to the poor. Luke's gospel is the gospel of the outcasts and the outsiders. Luke's gospel is a turning-the-world-on-its-head gospel, and it's not surprising that Mary should sing a song that sounds like an Old Testament Psalm in a way, but which is really a song of revolution and change. In Mary's day, and in the Middle Ages, and even today, a world where the powerful are brought down and the lowly are lifted up, where the rich go away empty and the hungry have full bellies, that is a world that seems pretty unlikely and pretty distant. But that's only because we ignore the whole context of Mary's song. She is singing a song about a world turned upside down, about an absurd world that could never happen, in the middle of a story about an absurd situation that never should have happened.

We are so used to it that we don't even notice how absurd this story is. It's about two pregnant women meeting. That is not the stuff of legend, and that is not the kind of story that anybody in the male-centered ancient world cared about, because women were marginal characters in anybody's story back then. Except that this is a crazy story and God has chosen to make these nobodies into important somebodies. One of the women, Elizabeth, is too old to be pregnant, so old that she shouldn't be able to have a baby at all. She and her husband have been trying to get pregnant for years without success, but here she is, pregnant at an advanced age, feeling the first kick of the new life within her when her baby hears Mary's voice. And the other woman, Mary, is not only too young to be having a child, but is also a virgin who is pregnant, which is, needless to say, a tad unusual! And this Mary, a young, unmarried, virgin pregnant girl, has just taken a successful five day journey to visit her relative Elizabeth, unaccompanied and unprotected, through rough terrain inhabited by thieves and bandits, a journey that armed groups of men would be hesitant to make,

and she's made it successfully and without incident. The whole situation is absurd and extremely unlikely, but here it is, brought about by the power of God, who can make barren women and virgins pregnant, and who therefore might just be able to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly, or fill the bellies of the poor and send the wealthy away empty, after all.

In fact, the story is about two nobodies God has turned into somebodies, two lowlies that God has raised up! Jesus isn't even born yet, and *already* the world is starting to turn upside down! This is what they understood in the Middle Ages, and this is what we have to understand, too. The birth of Jesus is a world changing event. The birth of Jesus is going to turn the world upside down. The birth of Jesus changes everything. God pours God's own self in love into human life, and when that happens, the powerless will find a friend, the poor will find hope, the outcasts will find a home.

With the birth of Jesus, everything is turned upside down: sinners will be forgiven, the sick will be healed, and the dead will be raised to life again. With the birth of Jesus, the long promised Messiah will come, and an unwed teenage mother will be called the most blessed woman of all ages by every generation, just as she so boldly and absurdly sang in her song.

This is the world when God is at work, a world where anything and everything is possible, a world turned upside down, or maybe, finally and at last, truly turned right side up, when the Savior is born. It's a crazy new world that God promises in Jesus Christ, and we welcome it and celebrate it with a crazy old sermon, because when God is at work, you never know what is going to happen. So put your crazy hats on and dream big.

What is it that God wants to accomplish through you in this coming year, with Jesus born again into the world? If we can't turn the whole world upside down, maybe we can turn a few people's worlds around. With God at our side, I know we can do it! Or rather, *!It do can we know I side our at God with. Amen*