

The Year of the Lord's Favor
Advent 3B
PPC
13 December 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Luke 1:46b-55

I don't know if you've ever been asked this question, but thirty years ago when I was a soloist at my home church in PA, before I was to perform at a church function, an older woman came up to me and asked, "Are you a Christian"? I didn't understand the meaning behind the question and the look on my face as I replied, "Of course", was one of confusion. I course this woman knew I was a Christian - we went to the same church. Her response, though, was a delighted one. "I knew you were!" Like that question, I have also been asked, "Have you been saved?" To that question I usually respond, "What am I being saved from?" From God's punishment? From the devil? From death?

What I didn't understand those many years ago was that "Are you a Christian?" was code for "Are you a conservative Christian?" Likewise, the question "Have you been saved?" is code for "Are you an evangelical Christian?"

For many Christians today salvation means "getting into heaven." When we look at salvation as our rescue from this earth and arriving in the place where other good people are, then we may have a skewed vision of what mission is. If we have an understanding of mission as the work of getting as many people as possible into heaven, we will focus on making sure we have converted as many people as possible into Christianity. Salvation defined in other worldly terms of getting into heaven after death limits the scope of our missional activities.

Isaiah challenges us to name salvation as a quality of life here and now that reflects God's desires for human community. What is salvation in this chapter of Isaiah? It is healing, liberty, release, and comfort (61:1-2). It is "the year of the Lord's favor". This is a reference to the "jubilee year" as described in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (25:1-23; 15:1-15). It is a year in which debts are wiped away, slaves are freed, fields are allowed to rest and land is returned to the original owners. This is a promise that God's deliverance is real, tangible, and worldly. We must not lose sight of the ways in which God's salvation is meant to transform *this* world.

Thus, if salvation is not about some other place and time but about the reality of the world as it was intended to be, what we may call "the reign of God", how do we participate in ushering in the "real world"? This could potentially be quite challenging to all forms of cultural Christianity that would make "church" an end in itself, a community of the saved devoted to maintaining a building, a set of programs, and a fellowship of the like-minded.

Mary sings of the world, described by Isaiah, in the passage of Luke that we have read this morning. Her song of praise, or *magnificat*, is an expression of hope in the God of Israel, a God who acts in history and scatters the proud and brings down the powerful. Mary speaks of a changed world and she sings in the language of revolution or a turning around as she expresses her understanding of the reversals that have begun to unfold.

When God moves into the world, everything changes. The old ordering of life is displaced in no uncertain terms. Through her song of justice, Mary calls us to be change agents for a better world for all. Mary sings of the yes of God.

In my years as the pageant director, I was amazed at how many calls I received before the casting began from mothers asking if their daughter could be Mary in the pageant. Many girls wanted to be angels because they got to do something but for those who wanted to be Mary it was an aspiration to be the queen with royal prerogatives. An unfortunate commentary, perhaps, on the church's traditional interpretations of Mary's part in the birth scene.

What if we restored the Magnificat to the Christmas pageant and understood Mary as a primary role model for serious disciples? After all, she is not only the bearer of the Saviour but also of the news that God's reign has broken through our status quo.

Her song is so often pushed to the background of our celebrations as we gaily prepare for Christmas by acquiring more. Perhaps that will be a gift of this pandemic. Our shopping will be curtailed.

I follow a "Christmas connections" site on FB where people display their Christmas trees. There was a tree this week that was entirely red, white, and blue, with patriotic symbols hung from every branch. The person who posted this picture, described it as her "patriotic tree." My only comment was that Christmas is not an American holiday. The negative comments my comment generated stunned me. One woman asked, "well, if it's not an American holiday, which country does it come from?" In the secular realm we have displayed, on what is a pagan tradition to begin with, a vulgar display of nationalism.

But, if we're listening, we hear Mary's song pierce through the secular self-satisfied feelings. We can hear of the new realm of which she sings. How do we fill up the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty?

When Jesus first preaches in his hometown synagogue, he uses these words of Isaiah. Jesus declares himself to be the fulfillment of the prophesy, the one to bring good news, healing, and release. Upon hearing those words, the community rises up against him and are prepared to murder him.

It's Advent and we want to hear the good news that says everything is fine. We've almost made it through a year that brought loss and despair. Our hope is that soon, soon, life will get back to normal. And here comes Isaiah with the news that everything will be changed. Mary sings to us of a God that has and will upset the status quo. *Nothing* will ever be the same again. We resist hearing that. We are like those neighbors of Jesus who were fine when he spoke in generalities but when he got down to the specifics of what God's vision for the world meant, they became angry.

There's a great scene in *The Fantasticks* where El Gallo is showing Luisa the world, He gives her rose colored glasses and together they begin a speedy journey through different places. With the glasses on, the world looks like a fairyland. Luisa only sees the beautiful. But when she removes her glasses, she sees the poor, and the pollution, and the criminal activity in the world. El Gallo yells at her to put the glasses back on.

Do we want to only see the world through our rose colored glasses? Is our hope for the future real when we have those glasses on? We can't pretend that our police systems are working well, that our prisons aren't full of young black men, that in the next forty days our president has ordered death row inmates to be executed, possibly by a firing squad. When we look at our city, how can we ignore the homeless and the hungry? We build gated communities for the wealthy so that they don't have to

encounter any people of color or the poor. These communities hire guards to protect them from the riffraff of the surrounding impoverished communities.

As middle class Americans we claim immunity from these ills. After all, I don't know too many people who are billionaires. But to be a restored Israel, living in a jubilee community, we must be prepared to be honest with ourselves. This message that Mary sings is not, perhaps, a popular Christmas theme that we want to hear. We are the wealthy and powerful in the world even if we're not billionaires. Where is the good news in these prophecies of Isaiah or in Mary's *Magnificat for us*? We don't want to give up what we have.

I once counseled a young woman who attended our parenting classes at the Miriam Center. She was 17 and pregnant for the fourth time. She was basically homeless as she went from friend to friend to stay at their homes. Her first three children were in foster care because of their mother's drug addiction. She was pregnant with twins and she knew that as soon as she gave birth these infants would be taken away from her because she was still an active user. My heart was broken as she said to me one day, "I want my children because I want someone to love me."

How will our mission reflect our love? We must live as people of the good news: liberation, justice, and comfort in such a way that no one needs to give birth to find love. Oscar Hammerstein penned these words: "A bell is no bell till you ring it, a song is no song till you sing it, and love in your heart wasn't put there to stay, love isn't love till you give it away." When we give away our love by feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, and binding up the broken hearted, releasing the prisoners, and being intentional

about what living in community means, we will be richer than we ever could have imagined.

Mary's song is one of praise and celebratory news. The son she bears will be the one to teach us all about the love that God has for each of us. To live on earth, in history, in anticipation of the fulfillment of the words that Mary sings, is the great challenge of our faith. Our joy on this third Sunday of Advent is that we remember not only *that* Jesus was born but *why* Jesus was born. He came to usher in a jubilee celebration that will have no end.

Let's join together and usher that new world in!