

Liberating Love

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1: 46-55

The promise of the coming of the Chosen One of God that gets heralded during Advent means different things to different people. It all depends on where you are and what conditions surround you.

For us, the comfortable class, who can not only feed our families and have reliable roofs over our heads, but can pay our bills and buy gifts for loved ones who don't really need much of anything, we have big screen TVs and smarty pants smart phones, cushy recliners, health insurance, and a generally pleasant and secure outlook on life and the future. For us in the comfortable class, we expect God's Chosen One in this season to be darling baby born to a pretty young girl. The baby brings us forgiveness of sins, and the good news of life eternal, the assurance of our further blessing in the next life.

For others, the struggling class, who have periods regularly when the food runs out and residence changes are frequent because the rent gets behind and eviction is imminent. Better to save up and start over than even bother trying to cover the back rent. We rely on the generosity of others to make the holidays worthwhile. If there is a big screen, it's from a rental center and the smart phone is financed, too. The recliner from the thrift store doesn't work well, and health insurance is irrelevant – you make too much for Medicaid and too little for Obamacare; it's the Emergency Room when there are health issues. For those in the struggling class, they expect God's Chosen One is coming to bring them hope, offering the possibility that things might actually be better at some time, that they'll be accepted and valued, that they'll be forgiven whatever curse that has afflicted their lives and those of their families and friends around them. The baby needs to grow up and make a difference.

What we hear in today's scriptures is the good news of God's Chosen One for those in the underclass, for the poor, weak, and marginal whose bleak struggles and hard times are to be transformed by the amazing ministry of God's Chosen One. Those who have endured under the yoke of oppression, who've been exhausted by years of struggle and sacrifice and suffering, and who labored for little simply to get by from one week to the next, and never held a true measure of security or stability that might inspire hope and vision, their experience is remote from ours in the comfortable class. But the good news is really addressed to them, not so much to us.

Listen as the passage from Isaiah depicts the coming of God's blessed servant as God brings about a new creation, and thereby reveals God's new life promise.

In the vision of the prophet, the harsh desert wilderness is made into a lush and colorful garden. The glory and majesty of God are brought to beautiful, sumptuous illustration on the improbable canvas of the barren, austere desert landscape. God is ready to work wonders for his people. But is the vision limited to the prophet? Can the

people of God grasp this vision? Do they understand the power that God is ready to employ on their behalf? Can they see, hear, and believe?

As if summoning an unsure people, the prophet exhorts, "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to the fearful, 'Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God... He will come and save you.'"

Isaiah even has something for the naysayers, the ones who disbelieve that God even cares about them, much less acts for them. *Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.* The amazing acts of God will transform even those whose existence has been defined by hopelessness, the blind. The deaf, the lame, and the mute are the outcasts, the ones who don't matter, who are expendable.

God loves God's people, despite their flaws – and there are many regardless of the class. God's love is a liberating love, freeing God's people from the constraints that act like bondage, that holds them in the same chronic struggle from one generation to the next, never progressing and forever under someone's thumb, trapped – hemmed in by life's intractable circumstances. For God's people such as these, there is love for the unlovable, grace for the ungracious, and hope for the hopeless. That spells liberation.

Finally, the prophet describes a sacred path - the Way of Holiness. Those faithful to God will have this path for their journey exclusively. The sinful unrighteous and wicked will be denied, and other predators, lions and ferocious beasts, will not be found there. The pathway to the Holy City Zion will not be plagued with threats and fears, but will ring with the sounds of joy and gladness. God brings his people home, uniting them once again unto himself, embracing them with a covenant of new life and sacred peace and blessing.

It would be easy to dismiss the incredible vision of the prophet, and deny the outrageous claims. That would be the practical and sensible thing to do. But when the faithful invoke the power of God, they put us on notice.

Before Nelson Mandela was released from prison, Archbishop Desmond Tutu stood in front of the South African Embassy in Washington D.C. one afternoon and said, "Those of you inside, are you listening? Do you hear me? You have already been defeated. Do you understand that? You have already lost and we on the outside have won. Out here, we know how this struggle for black freedom and liberation will turn out, for God is on the side of the oppressed. It's not 'We *shall* win.' Oh no! We have *already* won! Only you on the inside have not yet realized it. We outsiders have, and we know the future. We are the future."

This is the witness that a prophetic faith evokes among the faithful, those truly believing, those who really get it. Speaking in such a crazy fashion sincerely believes that the power of God overturns the world's powerful in their defiance of God's demands for justice for his people. Seeing and hearing, and then truly believing and acting on the promise of faith is what calls into being God's will. God's liberating love breaks through

worldly claims to power and sovereignty, overturning them and giving justice, peace, and new life to God's people.

The song of Mary in Luke's gospel is known as the *Magnificat* for the opening Latin word, which gets translated here as *glorifies* but also *magnifies*. Mary has been visited by the angel and has met with her cousin Elizabeth. At this point, we have Mary now in full recognition of the blessing of the Lord being borne within her. She knows who she is as she remarks that God *has been mindful of the humble state of his servant*. She is a "nobody" and she knows it, making her all the more joyful in her blessing. Before, she had been troubled and confused at the strange happenings. No longer. She can gotten a handle on what God is doing. She can see with the vision of a powerful telescope and transport us to the new world she beholds in this miracle.

For her day, the challenge of the story would be to make sense out of strange occurrences, reaching into the ancient prophecies to see what stunning things God was doing. For people today, it casts down the warm fuzzies and the designer decorations and the commercialized gift giving and all the rest that goes into making comfortable the comfortable for a sweet season.

Mary reveals the coming of the Lord in words that might come from a prophet. Indeed, Mary's words *are* those of a prophet. One commentator suggested that she sounds not like Mother Theresa, but rather like Mother Jones, the fiery union organizer for mine workers at the turn of the 20th century.

Reading this, we're far removed from the demure and angelic Mary of serene manger scenes when she perceives that **she** has been chosen – this nobody girl – over any other female of stature, power, or privilege, or any family of royalty, lineage, wealth or standing. She declares that this was a deliberate act of God disclosing what God is doing, what was foretold, just as the prophets said.

With this child given to Mary, God is bringing forth his justice and righteousness, and Mary tells it like the best of the prophets. We need to hear it loud and clear when Mary says: *[God] has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.* Amos couldn't have said it better.

When we see Mary with such awareness, with her having gotten the picture of what God is doing, and magnifying it before us with her *Magnificat*, we now look ahead in Luke and see a different Mary. She is not uncertain, wondering, or surprised. The only other mention we have about Mary is after the shepherds arrive, when it says: *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* We may get tripped by the word translated as *ponder* (*συμβαλλο*) which has more of the sense of discussing or debating, an active mental process rather than a somewhat aimless or unfocused reflection. She was digesting everything and wrestling with it all. She knew enough that this may be a mixed blessing, for the one who serves God never has a good

time. Serving God is dangerous work, particularly to accomplish what is foretold, bringing down the powerful and lifting up the poor.

Regardless, Mary gets it, and produces a picture for us that enables us to behold the very different meaning of this birth from what we're accustomed to, what we're acculturated to expect in the comfortable class. Mary understands what we should understand; that God has an agenda that overturns the accepted, customary and commonplace, no matter what you may see or think. God has a love that liberates the underclass and downtrodden, bringing the light of hope and the blessing of new life to those who had endured darkness and despair. Yes, the Lord comes, but he doesn't look at all like Santa Claus.