Joy for the Nobodies

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 in the comfortable class, we see God's Chosen One in this season as darling baby born to a pretty young girl. For us, this baby expresses God's love for us, brings us forgiveness of sins, and the sweet news of a heavenly eternal after-life. It expresses the assurance for the comfortable that all is well and all will stay well. There is never any suggestion that you should be disturbed in the slightest in your comfort. It's a happy holy day … at least until I come along.

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. It is good news for the nobodies, but in our comfort, we are not the subjects of this because we are the somebodies.

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 and the deaf, the lame, and the mute, the outcasts, the expendable, failed nobodies.

God loves God's people, despite their flaws – and there are many flaws 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 nobodies, there is love for the unlovable, grace for the ungracious, and hope for the hopeless. That spells liberation and new life.

This could be liberation and new life for the comfortable as well – the somebodies. They might come to understand how they have been empowered to serve the work of God and the Kingdom, to act with full commitment and employ their blessings to be agents of liberation and new life together with the nobodies. But then as now, the comfortable somebodies truly have no desire to unmoor themselves from their comfortable routines. Defined by degrees of inertia and indifference, complacency and complicity, they are the ones whose eyes remain blind and whose ears cannot hear what God would do with them. They falsely embrace the peculiar promise that they're receiving forgiveness of sins, the love of God, and the sweet news of a heavenly eternal after-life. It is the sweet news that they see and hear and believe, not the good news that comes for the nobodies.

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 nobodies home, uniting them once again unto himself, embracing them with a covenant of new life and sacred peace and blessing. The somebodies stay in their gated communities and secure properties, cheering each other with parties and exchanging gifts, celebrating the sweet news that all is well for them all.

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. Such faith and power is a potent force that sees for the nobodies what the somebodies behold with scoffing and mocking.

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 has 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 of the ridiculous exuberance that goes into making comfortable the comfortable for their sweet season of sweet news.

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. That's why the bulletin cover image is so appropriate, so reflective of the good news as opposed to the sweet news.

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, and may suffer a bad outcome in serving God's mission. Serving God is dangerous work, particularly to accomplish what is foretold here, 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 see all around us, what we're acculturated to expect and appreciate in the comfortable class of sweet news. Mary understands what we should understand; that God has an agenda that turns the accepted order upside down, even though we revel in the stability, security, and prosperity of the comfortable. God has a love to liberate the nobodies, 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 comes with good news for the nobodies and a different message for us.