

## **St. Lucas, December 22-23, 2018**

### **Right Side Up**

Veli-Matti Karkkainen writes, “In God’s saving work, there is a mysterious interplay of divine and human, or ordinary and extraordinary, or regular and miraculous.”<sup>1</sup> This is true throughout the whole of the Biblical testament, and has remained true throughout history, but it’s especially evident in the text today. Ordinary lives are suddenly disrupted, and become extraordinary as God goes about God’s work of salvation; of setting the world right.

Our story begins with Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the Judean countryside following a visit from an angel; the moment of disruption in her otherwise ordinary life. During that angelic conversation she learns she will become pregnant with the Son of God, and she learns that Elizabeth, an aged woman beyond the age of conceiving, is also pregnant because nothing will be impossible with God. It is on the heels of this visit from the angel that she sets out with haste to see Elizabeth.

This journey and visit is, for Mary, an act of faith. On one hand she is likely seeking confirmation that all the angel told her is true. This does not make it any less an act of faith, as faith is never free of questioning, as questioning and exploration can only serve to deepen our faith and understanding of truth. After all, if you had a vision in which you were told such things as the angel told her, wouldn’t you want to know if it was real and what you were really in for? So she goes to see Elizabeth. If Elizabeth is indeed pregnant, it would validate what she had been told by the angel. On the other hand, I wonder if she went to Elizabeth in part to celebrate the miracle of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with her and be present with her; not simply to receive something from the visit, but maybe her primary motivation is to give something in this visit; to give her presence, love, support, and validation.<sup>2</sup> However, before she even has a chance to offer anything, she receives confirmation by the Spirit moving through Elizabeth.

Merely upon hearing a greeting from Mary, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb, John the Baptist, leaped with joy, and Elizabeth says, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

“Blessed is she who believed...” Mary took action based on her faith, on her belief, and immediately upon arrival she finds that her faith was indeed not misplaced. She does find a pregnant Elizabeth, and Elizabeth offers the validation by the Spirit that Mary is the mother of the Lord, and she was right to act on her belief and come to Elizabeth.

So here we are with two ordinary women, in an ordinary place, both going through the rather common experience of pregnancy, and yet there is nothing ordinary about what is going on, and it’s really only through being together in their shared condition that they can fully understand the scope of what is happening. Through being together they find that their experience and belief are validated, they come to understand themselves more deeply, and they come to see how they in their individual experiences and roles fit in the bigger picture of God’s saving work in the world. They come to see how their smaller stories fit within the larger story of God’s activity.<sup>3</sup> This interaction between these two women, then, seems to point us to what is possible in this place, in this community, in the relationships we form and maintain here. Our faith draws us

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<sup>1</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Advent 2)*, ed. David L. Bartlett; Barbara Brown Taylor. (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 1570-1571.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Redman, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Advent 4)*, ed. David L. Bartlett; Barbara Brown Taylor. (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Location 3121.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bennett, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Advent 4)*, ed. David L. Bartlett; Barbara Brown Taylor. (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 3181-3187.

together, and we are free to question and explore God and God's ways together as we seek out truth. We are here for each other to support one another whatever life may bring, and in our explorations of faith. We are able to give and receive, and be transformed. In the course of the exploration and participation in community we come to understand ourselves, our hearts, and our beliefs more deeply, we come to recognize the gifts we possess as individuals, and we come to see how those gifts fit with the gifts of others in such a way that we are able to move as one body to participate in God's bigger vision of salvation for the world. We become people transformed to participate in the transformation of the world.

Mary and Elizabeth met together as individuals, and they both perhaps needed something from their time together, but ultimately they understood that what was happening and what they were participating in was not about them. They each possessed unique, miraculous gifts from God to the world, and the gifts they carried, nurtured, loved, and sent into the world, were meant to bring life to all people and all of creation. There was nothing individual or isolated about what they were experiencing. Likewise, while we gather in our individuality with our individual needs (and there is much to be gained by participating in this community as an individual; there is comfort, support, nurture, and love), we are part of something bigger; something that goes beyond our own individual spirituality and salvation; something that is about the here and now, the flesh, the world, the embodiment of faith that seeks to turn the world right side up, which is God's larger work. Mary and Elizabeth's experience was very much one of flesh and embodiment. It was physical and of this world, and they, particularly Mary, understood the worldliness of the vision of salvation she was participating in as the mother of the Lord, even as she was blessed by it as an individual.

Upon receiving confirmation that she was indeed the Mother of the Lord, she sang a song that describes this bigger picture of God's saving work in which she was participating, and in which we participate. The text represents what God was initiating in the baby she was carrying, and the work we, as the Body of Christ now, continue, and it is about this world, and the transformation of the way our world is structured and ordered.

She sings that God has shown strength and scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted the lowly, and filled the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty. This is a packed statement. First, it points us to examining the incarnation itself and its location. God has chosen not to come into the world amongst the proud, amongst the powerful, or amongst the rich; not amongst those who are at the center of the world. God has chosen to enter the world in the margins. Mary, who carries the incarnation of the Divine, is a poor, unwed woman living under the oppression of the Roman empire in the middle of nowhere, and this is where God chooses to come into creation. This alone reveals where God's heart is, and reveals that the world is upside down from how God would have it. In the terms of liberation theologians, this reveals God's preferential option for the poor; God's special love for the poor and oppressed, as expressed throughout the whole of Scripture, embodied now in God taking on flesh amongst the margins. This preferential option for the poor does not mean that God does not love the powerful and the rich, or all people, but it does beckon the powerful and rich and those with resources to a conversion toward the poor and oppressed in such a way that they use their power and wealth and whatever gifts they have in the interest of God's vision for the world; a world of peace rooted in justice and equity so that poverty and oppression exist no more; where the lowly are lifted and the hungry filled. This then is another dimension of Mary's song. Her baby boy, throughout his life and ministry, would scatter the proud, would work against the powerful in the interest of the lowly, and would fill the hungry while instructing the rich to be converted and change their ways. He entered a world, our world as it remains, that was upside down, and he sought to turn it the right side up, the way God intended, and, as the Body of Christ, such remains our work, the work our faith is all about, the work our faith compels us to, even commands us to. Friends, hear me now, and hear me clearly, God loves you. You are ever held in

God's loving embrace. Nothing can change that. I've no doubt about that, and I hope you have no doubt about that, you should have no doubt about that. Now, how will we express that love, this love we've received, to the world God loves, because the fact of the matter is how we choose to live out our faith in this world, a faith rooted in God's love, has real, embodied, life and death consequences for us, creation, and particularly our neighbors on the margins. As paradoxical as it may seem, at the end of the day, our faith isn't really totally about us; our participation in a community of faith isn't really about us, but it is ultimately about participating in God's movement in the world that seeks to turn the world right side up; to participate in the movement of God toward a world of peace rooted in justice and equity where violence, oppression, poverty, and all hindrances to abundant life exist no more. God entered the world through an ordinary woman, in an ordinary place, and God continues to enter the world through ordinary people like you and I, in ordinary places like ours, to act for God's life-giving purposes. So, let us be a community of love and support for each other. Let us be a community where we grow in faith through questioning and exploration together. Let us be a community where we can discover the God-given gifts we each possess, and where we can utilize those gifts together to participate in God's work of turning the world right side up. Let us be open to allowing God to move through us in such ways that the proud will be scattered, the lowly lifted, and the hungry filled.