

Good News from the Perspective of a Young Peasant Girl

Luke 1:46-55

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
December 14, 2008

It is generally accepted that there is a disconnect between the message we proclaim in the Church during Advent, and the way in which society at large celebrates the Christmas season. To be sure, both culture and Church encourage a festive celebration of the season, and both proclaim a sense of urgency in their respective messages. But the reasons for the celebration and the urgency are far different in the prevailing culture and the Church.

Through the blitz of advertising and catalogs, the secular emphasis at Christmastime is clearly on the commercial. It's no coincidence that some retailers bring in up to 80% of their annual revenues in the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year.

I suspect that some of you feel like you're listening to a broken record every time I come into the pulpit and decry the commercialization of the celebration of the birth of our Savior. John Buchanan notes that "There is a sense in which attacking the commercialization of Christmas from the pulpit is not only easy but predictable. Churchgoers come to expect at least one December sermon on the capture of our festival by secular culture, the cult of Santa Claus, the erosion of any religious content in the face of overwhelming commercialization and in order not to offend anyone's sensibilities."¹

But really, this is the way it ought to be. We should not expect Wal-Mart or Belk or Best Buy to carry the torch of the Good News of Jesus Christ. That's our job. It is natural that there be a disconnect between the proclamation of the world and the proclamation of the Church, because there is a genuine disconnect between the ways of the world and the ways of God.

And during this festive time of the year, it would be counterproductive for retailers to proclaim a message that would offend our sensibilities, especially when many of them bring in up to 80% of their annual revenues during the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year.

No, if there is anything offensive about the Christmas message, it likely will come only to those who listen closely to the Christmas story found in the Bible. You see, there will always be a tension between the Church and the world, and that tension is most evident during Advent. It is into a prevailing mindset that says that life can only be meaningful when we buy more, get more, pursue more, that the Good News proclaims something entirely different.

Enter, a young pregnant peasant girl named Mary. The verses we just read have a beautiful poetic quality about them. And they have been immortalized time and again with musical composition through the centuries. Yet how often do we look beyond the poetic beauty, how often do we listen to the words being so artfully sung, at the real message that Mary is proclaiming? For the truth is, this Song of Mary, this Magnificat, proclaims a message that is revolutionary and, to many in our world, perhaps even subversive.

There was a time even as recent as the past twenty years that the public reading of the Magnificat in places like El Salvador and Guatemala was forbidden. You know, all that language about God scattering the proud and bringing down rulers and sending the rich away empty-handed didn't sit well with the military juntas and the land-owning aristocrats of the region.

Even Martin Luther, champion of the common person in the Protestant Reformation--when he and his followers translated the Bible into German, they left the Magnificat in the Latin, the language of the upper class. It turns out that Luther's greatest patrons and supporters --those who provided for him financially and who protected him from the Roman Catholic Church--were German princes who took a dim view of the social implications of Mary's song.²

You see, Advent is a time in which we are challenged to recognize that the world is not the way God intends for it to be. In the kingdom of our world, there are abuses of power (witness the Governor of Illinois as the latest shining example of corruption). In the kingdom of our world the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. In the kingdom of our world people go hungry just down the street from the restaurants that fill their dumpsters with leftover food every night.

And the Good News that Mary cannot contain is that God takes the ways of the kingdom of the world, and turns them upside down. The kingdom inaugurated by this child in the womb of Mary is known by the justice and compassion of God. In the kingdom of God, there is a reversal of fortunes. The first will be last, and the last will be first. There is a different way of life for citizens of this new kingdom that Mary announces, a kingdom where humility is held in high esteem, and the poor are lifted up, and the hungry are fed.

There is a sense that the rich will not find the words of Mary's song comforting. It's not because this Magnificat condemns riches. It is because riches have this way of preventing us from recognizing our need; riches make us self-sufficient. The gospel that Mary heralds is only Good News for those who know they need redemption. And the truth is the poor, the humble, those who lack basic necessities--they are the ones who recognize the Good News in Mary's words.

Don't you see, the gospel is for those who know they're poor. And so for you and me and for everyone else who is part of the most affluent society in the history of the world, the great challenge is for us to recognize our true poverty. Only when we realize that we're not self-sufficient, only when we realize that we don't have everything we need or know how to get it, only when we realize that all our power still won't buy our citizenship in the kingdom of God--only when we recognize that we are poor and in need of God's help will we embrace the Good News that Mary proclaims.

The gospel is Good News only when we recognize our own emptiness, even in the midst of plenty. Faith begins with an acknowledgment of need, a realization that what we need cannot be found in the things we have. Faith begins when we acknowledge our need, and we turn to God and we ask God to fill that need.

And then for us to live in the kingdom that Mary announces requires that we engage in some of that subversive thinking that offers relief to the poor and the hungry, to the lonely and the oppressed. For us to live in the kingdom that Mary announces means we who have had our needs met by the grace and generosity of God will now become instruments of God's grace and generosity for others.

It is a temptation in uncertain economic times, not only for us to spend cautiously, but also to give cautiously. Churches and charities are trimming their budgets, and ours is no exception. But know this--

those who are losing jobs and who struggle to pay their mortgages are showing up at our doorstep in much greater numbers. The ethical challenge for those of us who buy into Mary's vision of the gospel kingdom is to act in ways that are counter-intuitive to the conventional wisdom, and to be generous when we think we can least afford to be generous.

This year our Christmas Eve offering will be designated for a benevolence fund to offer relief to those who are having a hard time keeping their lights turned on, or those who every month worry about whether or not this will be the month they will face eviction. That fund has already been established, and so you don't have to wait until Christmas Eve. You can simply make a gift and designate it "Economic Relief Fund".

The message of Christmas ought to do more than create a warm and fuzzy feeling in our hearts; it ought to move us to work for a better world, for a world where tomorrow is better and more just than today.

Through the perspective of a young pregnant peasant girl named Mary we learn that the kingdom she proclaims--God's kingdom--is vastly different from the kingdom in which we currently live.

Are you willing to sing Mary's song?

¹ John Buchanan, "Reversal of Fortunes," December 10, 2000, www.fourthchurch.org/sermons

² ibid