

FIRST LESSON: Micah 5:2-5
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1:46-55
December 15, 2024
THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“The Great Reversal”

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It’s called the “Great Reversal.” The first shall be last, and the last first. The most privileged will be laid low, and the entire social hierarchy will be flipped on its head as the humble are lifted up. It is the dream of oppressed people everywhere. We can see before our eyes what is happening in Syria right now with those finally free of the Assad regime. Along with joy is bitter grief and a call for justice because of the atrocities uncovered. There is a desire not only for the poor to be lifted up, but for those who were once on top to be brought low. The Syrian rebels even burned the coffin of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad’s father, also a brutal dictator. And in our nation, there is surprising sympathy for a young man who committed cold blooded murder because he targeted the head of an insurance company, a company that had cost the lives of countless people by refusing to pay for necessary treatments.

The “Great Reversal” can have an edge to it. And Mary’s words might also have had an edge to them, because the people lived under the oppression of a foreign power. More than this, however, society itself was tipped in favor of the rich and powerful and against the poor, regardless of who was ultimately in charge.

Our version of Christianity often misses the point of these cries for justice, because we have been taught to be narrowly individualistic. We focus almost exclusively on the individual over the collective, and as a result we seek to push ourselves to the head of the line. The first are FIRST in our world. We don’t even see the people at the back of the line because we refuse to look at systemic issues. If they are oppressed, they must have done something to cause it. Americans go to great lengths to avoid corporate responsibility. Waiving the mythic power of the individual in front of our eyes is the convenient smokescreen our society uses for the powerful to evade accountability. We have created a fictional “pull yourself up by your bootstraps Christianity.” But in truth we are all parts of much larger groups in society, and there are many things we have no control over.

Mary knew what being the victim of a system that worked against her was like. And she responded in words that have since come to be known as “The Magnificat,” from the Latin translation of the word “magnify.” In the Greek in which Luke was written, the root of this word is mega. It means to make something big. Mary was making God’s name big. She was declaring God’s

glory. What Mary said boils down to eleven things. The first three are personal. She said:

- That her soul is filled with praise and joy in God.
- That God has thought of her even though she has no status in society at all.
- That from now on she will be called blessed because God has singled her out.

She then went on to describe God's nature and works, saying:

- God is merciful from one generation to the next.
- God is powerful.
- God knocks the proud off their feet.
- God brings down rulers who think they are above the law.
- God lifts up the humble and poor.
- God feeds needy people and helps them.
- God does not give to greedy people who want even more. God sends them away with empty hands.
- God has remembered Israel and all the descendants of Abraham.

Everything Mary said exudes the "great reversal." The first shall be last and the last first. And when we stop to ponder a moment on the teachings of Jesus, it was this young woman who raised him. God chose her knowing that these were the lessons she would pass on. God promised hope for those who have lost all hope, and honor for those society tramples on. The way we have structured our world is not the way God wants us to structure our world. And as young as she was Mary knew this.

Young Jewish women of Mary's time and place were not encouraged to think deeply on spiritual, political or social matters. It was expected that Mary would accept her lowly position in society and get on with it. It was expected that Mary would believe she was inferior and not question. It was assumed that she would conclude that the powerful were powerful because God gave them that power and they deserved it, and the poor were powerless and poor because they were inherently inferior. Poor people were not to question their lot in life. Poor women were really not supposed to question their lot in life. But Mary dared to speak **prophetically**.

Mary also said she was blessed by God. Our version of "blessed" is very different from the biblical idea of being blessed. We say we are blessed with comfort and security, nice homes and healthy children. We are blessed when everything is going well and we just got a promotion. But that is not God's idea of "blessed." To be blessed is to be close to God. To be blessed is to be in the center of God's will. In our terms Mary was not blessed at all! She was a peasant girl from a tiny village in a really awkward situation—pregnant outside of marriage. She had no money and no social standing. If anything, she teetered on the edge of social ruin. And Mary's future would be no easier. Simeon prophesied in the temple when Jesus was dedicated to God saying, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34–35). Mary would suffer greatly as she watched her beloved son face opposition, and finally watched him suffer

and die. This is not our idea of blessed. But Mary was in the center of God's will and plan, and God gave her a clear vision. The God who turns things upside down was at work. Rejoice! God's priorities are not ours. God's design for how society should work is not ours. God's favored ones are not the billionaires. What brings people status in this world counts for nothing in the kingdom of God, and ultimately, all will be put right.

What causes our hearts to rejoice? At this time of year with the barrage of advertising coming at us from every angle we might think it is material things, but when we consider possessing these things without our loved ones, *they quickly turn to ash*. They mean nothing. A mansion is nothing without a loving family living in it. Those who have sought fame and fortune discover this very quickly. It is hollow and even painful if you are living alone in a mansion, and especially so if those close to you are only close to you because of self-interest. We all desperately need to be loved for ourselves, not for how much we possess. Except for a puppy or kitten, money cannot buy love.

And what of power? The human remains of Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez have been burned, but this man has already stood before God and been judged for his acts on earth. His power was fleeting. His condemnation will be eternal. The battle against human and spiritual evil will continue until Christ returns. That doesn't mean we give up. We will never be able to create the kingdom of God on earth. It cannot be done legally or politically. Human sin will always get in the way. That doesn't mean we stop trying. There will always be powerful politicians who think only of their own aggrandizement and power. That doesn't mean we don't call them out. Jesus did, and Jesus calls us to follow his example. But above all else we must not make the mistake of copying the world's values and making them our own. God chooses the humble, not the arrogant. God chooses mercy, not hate. God sent Jesus into the world to begin the great reversal, and to open our eyes to what is true, and what is an illusion. Amen

Micah 5:2-5

² "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."

³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.

⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.
And he will be our peace
when the Assyrians invade our land
and march through our fortresses.
We will raise against them seven shepherds,
even eight commanders,

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”