

St. Paul's, Concord  
December 22 & 23, 2018  
Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45  
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More than 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah pronounced that a tiny town in the Judean countryside would become the birthplace of the King of Israel. Then Micah went on to say, "he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace." (Micah 5:4-5)

Around 800 years later, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews quoted Christ, the one believed to be the King referred to in Micah's prophesy, saying, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings ... See, I have come to do your will." (Hebrews 10:8-9)

These two passages, one from the Old Testament, one from the New, tell us just how dramatically the arrival of the Messiah changed human perspective. The humblest birthplace for the greatest king the world has ever known. A mighty ruler who achieves victory not by violence but by preaching a gospel of peace. And a man who came to be known as the King of the Jews, who turns the Jewish laws of sacrifice on their heads.

Every Advent and Christmas we're reminded of how Jesus defied all expectations: with his humble parentage, by his lowly birth, and through the surprising assortment of visitors who made their way to the manger. The miracle of the incarnation, the extraordinary phenomenon of God made flesh, took place in circumstances that could only be described as ordinary.

And the ordinariness began with Mary.

In your collection of Christmas cards, I'm sure there are many featuring Mary – a young woman cloaked in blue with a golden halo, her beautiful face, her calm serenity, bathed in the light of the Christmas star. That's the image we encounter, over and over again, on Christmas cards, in paintings and sculptures, even in the words of poems and Christmas carols. Of course, it's right that we revere the holy mother, but we can take that reverence so far that we miss some important realities.

From the moment Mary received her visit from Gabriel, her world was turned upside-down. Not only was there the public disgrace she faced, from an apparently illegitimate pregnancy, there was also the possibility that Joseph would reject her. But even when she was assured of her future husband's acceptance and support, Mary still had all the discomforts, fears, and uncertainties of impending motherhood to contend with. After all, Gabriel didn't say, "You will be with child and give birth to a son – but don't worry, you'll barely notice it." Yes, Luke's gospel tells us that Mary conceived miraculously, but nowhere does Scripture say that she missed out on a normal pregnancy, labor, and the challenges of motherhood.

But, as we know, Mary didn't hesitate. Somehow she understood that the very fact of her ordinariness was an important part of God's plan. She also understood that human rules and customs are no match for God's saving acts. So Mary embraced her role of Holy Mother knowing that it wasn't only her own small world that would soon be turned upside-down.

And, shortly afterwards, when she visited her cousin Elizabeth, Mary described that upside-down world in the verses we know as the Magnificat, or Mary's Song.

*From this day all generations will call me blessed...*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.* (Luke 39:48, 51-52)

What the Magnificat illustrates so beautifully is that breathtaking topsy-turvy-ness that signifies God incarnate. The theme of Mary's Song couldn't be any clearer: the powerful will be laid low while the lowly are lifted up; the hungry will be satisfied and the rich will be left empty-handed. These were some of the facts Mary learned during her time of preparation for Jesus' arrival. As the season of Advent comes to a close, as *we* come to the end of *our* time of preparation for Jesus' arrival, have we learned, as Mary did, that defying expectations is the way a life of faith works? Or are we still striving for the *world's* values?

When Mary was expecting her son, there were plenty of negative reactions, plenty of interfering influences, plenty of worldly expectations that could have distracted her from the amazing knowledge she received from the angel Gabriel. But Mary didn't allow herself to be distracted. Instead she sought out Elizabeth's company and wisdom. Instead, she allowed God to speak to her through her cousin's affirmation, and through the joy of the baby who leapt in Elizabeth's womb when he sensed the presence of God's Son.

The greatest stories in the Bible are the stories that tell of ordinary people who suddenly find themselves involved in fulfilling God's *extraordinary* plans. These people often experience their lives being turned upside-down, as Mary did. Balancing that sense of turmoil, like Mary, they discover the inexplicable wonder of God's presence within them, and the warmth and comfort of God's love surrounding them. And, like Mary, they have no choice but to follow the path God has set for them – because they have no desire to be anything other than the person *God* wants them to be.

Some of the greatest stories *outside* of the Bible are *also* about ordinary people whose lives are transformed by God, as they take their part in the fulfillment of God's plans – knowingly or unknowingly.

A parishioner once told me a story of her agnostic husband who asked her whether she thought Christmas had much to do with Jesus these days. At the moment he asked her that question, they were wrapping some gifts that her husband had bought for a needy family – and he'd just finished explaining to her that the reason he likes buying gifts for strangers is that they don't know who you are, so they can't possibly feel as though they ought to reciprocate in kind. In other words, his actions were very much in line with Jesus' instructions given in Luke 14:

*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.*

*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.*

Luke 14:12-14

It seems to me that if the pregnant Elizabeth had been there with that man and his wife, baby John would have leapt for joy in his mother's womb – because he would certainly have sensed the presence of Jesus!

As members of an active and responsive parish, we turn the world upside-down on a daily basis. Through our outreach ministries we treat society's outcasts with compassion and respect; we devote time to worshipping a God whose existence is denied by many of our acquaintances; we give our money to support sacred ministry instead of using it to accumulate the possessions and status that are so revered in the world. Most of all we turn personal encounters upside-down when we choose to treat all human beings as beloved children of God – as Jesus constantly urges us to do.

Seeing Jesus in others, or being Christ-like ourselves, is how we became a part of the breathtaking topsy-turvyness of Jesus, God incarnate. And it happens most often in quite ordinary, mundane situations – when we're just getting on with our life, and doing what we know is right without trying to analyze it. These are the times when we live our faith most genuinely, or notice others living theirs. And these are times when the gospel is proclaimed more clearly in actions than in words.

After one of those moments we may just pause, take a breath and sense the loving and affirming presence of God. It's the very same presence that Mary experienced in such a wondrous way – the presence of the One who longs to turn our lives – and our world –upside-down, to change our perception, and to give us all we need to be the very best that we can be.