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Luke 1:39-55  
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the Magnificat

### **HUMMING THE TUNE, FORGETTING THE WORDS**

When I turned to one of my favorite Bible commentaries this week, a pastor from California began his article of the song of Mary this way: “The Greatest Christmas carol in history was not written by Irving Berlin or Nat King Cole. The greatest carol is not “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” or “White Christmas” or even “Silent Night.”

The greatest carol was composed 2,000 years ago by a pregnant teenage girl who was visiting her cousin Elizabeth. After Elizabeth pronounced a blessing, Mary poured out a song.”

Well, not exactly. And this is what I mean when I say that pastors need to preach with more intellectual honesty. You see, most scholars believe that the gospel of Luke was written in the eighth or ninth decade of the first century (some now think it may have even have been later, at the beginning of the second century). That means that Luke’s gospel, which includes all of the most fanciful and beloved elements of the Christmas story, was written somewhere between 60-100 years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

Since nobody was around to take notes during Mary’s scandalous pregnancy (because nobody would have thought it important to do so), or to record the moment when John and Jesus seemed to recognize one another in utero (with John leaping for joy in his mother’s womb at the sound of Mary’s voice), it is also highly doubtful that anyone was around to record a spontaneous song sung by a teenage girl who was probably illiterate!

It's a magnificent song, of course, which is why we call it The Magnificat, but it was either composed by Luke, or included by him from some other source, perhaps as an existing hymn in the early church, and then placed in the mouth of Mary. And of course, just to make things more interesting, his real name probably wasn't Luke, since like the other gospel writers; he would have thought nothing of borrowing the name of a famous person, like an apostle, to add credibility to his work. Today we call it forgery, but in those days they called it a compliment.

In the case of the writer of Luke's gospel, he created beautiful stories and rich metaphors to make the case that the clues to the identity of the Messiah were there from the beginning, like angels and shepherds and a teenage mother who burst into song and spontaneously produced one of the most radical songs in the world — a collection of verse so counter-cultural, so upside down, that it has actually been banned in some countries.

In the 1980's, when liberation theology was spreading throughout Central America, the U.S. backed government of Guatemala banned this song - which, when you think about it, is an interesting thing to do - banning a song reputed to have been sung by Mary in a mostly Catholic country! It's like putting duct tape over the mother of God.

But the truth is government officials considered it too dangerous to be read or to be sung. "Away in a Manger?" No problem. "Silent Night", go ahead, sing it. "The Magnificat?" No can sing. It was considered too subversive, too politically dangerous. Why? Because authorities worried that it might incite people to riot. All that talk of God bringing down rulers from their thrones might just give people ideas. They might hit the streets. You remember when people used to hit the streets, don't you?

They still do, of course, just not much around here. Take those young Iranians who have taken to the streets by the tens of thousands, risking their lives to protest a corrupt regime and a stolen election. We had our own disputed election (in my opinion, our own stolen one) in 2,000, and yet nobody took to the streets to protest. Polls show that most people opposed the bailout of Wall Street, and the war in Iraq, but with a few exceptions, it was business as usual — and war is big business.

Now those same polls show that the majority of Americans want both meaningful health care reform and a public option to force the cost of insurance down, but in what will surely go down as one of the saddest spectacles in American politics, the so-called health care reform bill is all but

eviscerated, stripped by opponents using any tactic, no matter of how deceitful or self-aggrandizing.

So whatever happened, I wonder, to the American tradition of protest? We seem almost too demoralized these days to protest, or have decided that it is better to amuse ourselves with sports, celebrity scandals, or get-rich schemes than to take back our democracy even though it is on life-support these days.

Historians will look back on this moment in American history as defining whether people or special interests run the country, and right now, people are losing. If after electing a young, reform-minded president and inspiring a whole generation of young people to believe in the political process again, we deliver no real change, and hand a victory to those whose only objective is their own return to power and to restore the status quo, then what sort of future will we fashion for our children and our grandchildren? Now that all the teeth have been pulled from the bill, if it passes, it will be nothing more than a government mandate to buy health insurance, with taxpayer's subsidies, from the very private insurance companies that are the source of the crisis to begin with. We aren't going to confront an evil system and overturn it - we are going to give it 30 million new customers! And yet no matter how bad things get, we seem immobilized, as if there is really nothing we can do.

Psychologists tell us that we are not actively protesting things we know are wrong for much the same reason that people cannot leave their abusive spouses. The more we don't act, the weaker we get. Ultimately, to deal with the painful humiliation over inaction in the face of an oppressor, we move to shutdown and escape with strategies such as depression, substance abuse, television, and other diversions, which only further keep us from acting. This is the vicious cycle of all abuse syndromes.

This past week we learned that the Wall Street firms we bailed out plan to pay 140 billion dollars in compensation and bonuses, an amount larger than the total budgets of over half a dozen important government agencies and larger than the total budget of some small countries. Have we no shame? Or isn't the more honest question: who has shamed us into complicity?

The answer, of course, lies with the very rulers that Mary sings about in the song that Luke placed on her lips, after seeing what the baby Jesus grew up to believe and to do. They are what the Bible calls "the principalities and powers." They rule us, and they have never and they will never, give up power unless we take it from them. The only power stronger than corporations and special interests is the power of the people united in a democracy against those who oppress them.

In the time of Mary, everyone knew how power worked, and everybody knew who the rulers were. Herod the Great, the King of the Jews, worked for Rome and hitched his wagon to Julius Caesar until Caesar was assassinated, and then convinced Mark Antony that he was on Antony's side. When Caesar Augustus overthrew Mark Antony, Herod said he'd really been a Caesar Augustus guy all along.

Reminds me of Joe Lieberman — who just pimps for power, including his own — even if that means he must contradict himself constantly and abuse the very filibuster rule that he once called for an end to. Joe “Herod the Great” Lieberman, on the side of billionaires and their disease treatment industry over the needs of the 40,000 people who die every year in this country because they have no health insurance. I have a new hero: Bernie Sanders, Independent of Vermont. He takes on the principalities and powers, introducing a bill to extend Medicaid to everyone. And yet to kill consideration of that bill, Oklahoman's Tom Coburn called for the entire bill to be read aloud on the senate floor, which would have taken hours of precious time. Meanwhile in churches across this country this morning, we are reading the Magnificat, the song of revolution and revolt, the song that says God will scatter those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

In Mary's time, there were no insurance giants or Wall Street titans living in a gilded parallel universe, but there was Herod, and he built huge buildings during his reign. One reason the Temple became so controversial in the time of Jesus is that it was built from the taxes paid by the poor, even those who were losing their land. The parables of Jesus are largely about poor peasants abused by wealthy land-owners and a God whose power was made perfect in weakness, but whose love is as prolific as the greed of those in power.

King Herod was apparently so paranoid about being hated that he knew there would be a big party when he died. So he is reputed to have had 70 elite Jewish citizens imprisoned with orders that they be executed on the day of his death so there would be tears in Israel, not a party. That's the kind of world that the first Christians lived in, and that's why the writer of Luke's gospel wrote a story in which a new kind of wisdom had come into the world, so that even Herod the Fox was outfoxed. Magi came bearing gifts asking, “Where is the one who has been born ‘King of the Jews’?” Do you see how that sticks it to Herod? He was the King of the Jews and don't you forget it. Wise men served him, and they better not forget it.

This song, this Magnificat, is pure subversion, just like the rest of the gospel. Listen: He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He

has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Compare this to most of the sermons that are heard from most of the pulpits in this land. They are pure sentiment. Be in favor of all the right things and against all the wrong things, and don't make trouble —and God will reward you by making you rich. There's even a new movement among prosperity gospel preacher who claim that Jesus wasn't poor at all — we've gotten it all wrong — he was really rich. I got a call for a reporter from CNN doing a story on this. Where did they get this idea? Not from the Bible, where Jesus has no possessions, no address, nothing to give away at his death and warns that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven — never mind all that. The prosperity preachers say that since the disciples had a treasurer, Jesus must have been rich. Welcome to the age of believing anything you want, as long as it works for you.

Think about it. If Mary's song is to be believed, and Jesus was rich, then God will send Jesus away empty. Perhaps this is why nobody every puts the Magnificat on a Hallmark card, and never have I heard Bing Crosby sing, "He sent the rich away empty." At Christmas we are too busy celebrating something we believe has been done for us, instead of something that is now required of us. We call it "Christ-mass" for a reason, Jesus is the reason for the season, and the reason for Jesus is that he was born to die for our sins.

But if we took Mary's song seriously, we should call it "The Great Reversal." Just think about that. What if instead of saying Merry Christ-Mass, we started a movement to say, "Merry Great Reversal and a Happy Upside Down Day! Are you going anywhere this year for the Great Reversal? Are your kids coming to see you this year for the Great Reversal? It's beginning to look a lot like The Great Reversal . . . What if we said that what we really wanted for Christmas this year was to have a few Oppressors knocked off their thrones, and for once, just once, for the hungry to be filled? Because we read this stuff in church, and then we go to brunch, but let's face it, things are not being turned upside down. The church is even helping to keep them right side up (and I do mean "right" side up).

Foolish little me, a year ago I thought that the only good thing that might come from this economic crisis was real reform, what Bill Maher calls New Rules — because surely we will have learned our lesson yet again, that when nobody is looking, and there are fortunes to be made, people will do terrible things to other people to make more money than they can ever spend. That's why the rule of law is so important, because it is our legal system that is supposed to scatter the proud in their inmost thoughts, and it our collective ethic in a

democracy that shames people for lying, instead of rewarding them for it. And here's the kicker: these guys are almost all Christians — many of them are all dressed up this morning, as I speak, sitting in church listening to Mary's song, the Magnificat. But I wonder if they are just humming the tune because they have forgotten the words? It would probably be better if we banned this song here also, like we banned songs by the Dixie Chicks, we could ban Mary's song as unpatriotic – because we are closer to religion as an opiate for the masses as we have ever been.

How odd when you consider the unearthly admiration for the Virgin Mary, especially in the Catholic tradition where she is deified. And yet here is this Jewish peasant girl making the charge that the world has gotten things pretty much exactly wrong. Our world says, blessed are the beautiful. Blessed are the rich. Blessed is Herod.

Her son would one day stand in a crowd of mostly poor listeners and say, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the meek." These ideas cannot both be right. And the church was born in the world to resist Herod, not to curry his favor. The Jesus movement was at its best when it was banned, and will be at its best again when people consider us to be subversive. When was the last time somebody said to you, "Have you gotten up the nerve to go to church yet?"

Mayflower has been trying to help with a community organizing effort to help the poor, and several prominent Catholic laypersons, urged on by local right-wing radio luminaries, labeled this effort a communist plot and scared half the Catholic churches into pulling out along with Catholic Charities. I wonder if they are reading Mary's song this morning? You know, "Hail Mary Mother of God, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb . . ."

Reminds me of what the late Brazilian bishop Dom Helder Camara said: "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist."

So, let us be clear. The Fox is still in charge of the henhouse (if fact he has a news network named after him). Herod the Lobbyist is still in charge of our fading democracy and those shameless bonuses will be paid, whether we like it or not. So what is the good news? People sleep walk for a long time before they finally wake up. But when they do, Herod is in trouble.

In the meantime, love your children, be kind and generous, never be mean, and strive to be in the world but not of it. And Merry Upside Down Day,

and a Happy Great Reversal to one and all. As Timothy Cratchit put it, (better known as Tiny Tim, the one on crutches), God bless us, every one!”

Amen.



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