

World Upside Down

Both of our texts today predict powerful upheavals in the world as we know it. Upheavals carried out by God, but proclaimed by people. Human agents tasked with God's mission. We could also call them revolutionaries.

The word "revolution" could connote a simple turning around—as a vinyl record revolves on a record player, or turntable (any of you still have one of those?). Or as the planets, including our own, slowly revolve around the sun. But "revolution" could also connote a revolving or turning that is, we might say, vertical, rather than horizontal. Upside down. Like I said, an upheaval.

In our lesson from Isaiah, the prophet himself is the appointed human agent, the "revolutionary." "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me," he declares. Which gives him power. Conviction. Courage. A direct call from God—the kind that one simply cannot refuse.

"The Lord has anointed me," Isaiah says. Like precious, fragrant oil upon his head. Normally, in biblical times, kings were the ones anointed. But not this time. Things have been turned upside down. This time, it's the prophet who gets anointed. And then, sent: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. Powerful upheavals, carried out by God. For some, it is good news, but not for all. In "the year of the Lord's favor" it's the poor whom the Lord favors. Those who have lost everything. One denarius, one livelihood, one house at a time. But now, by God's command, what they have lost shall be returned to them. Their land. Their livestock, perhaps. Their wealth. Their city. Those who mourned will now rejoice. Those who have been covered in ashes shall now wear garland (like a bride and bridegroom would wear at a wedding). A dramatic upheaval. A complete reversal.

In our gospel lesson, the revolutionary is Mary. Figures, it would be a woman. Women had no power, in biblical times. Especially, unmarried women. Especially pregnant unmarried women. But there she is, three months pregnant, arriving to greet her slightly more pregnant, and equally powerless cousin Elizabeth, whose baby leaps in the womb when her cousin comes through the door. First Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, then it is Mary's turn.

In her inspired speech, which we now refer to as the Magnificat, Mary identifies five reversals that God has carried out, five upheavals, five dimensions of her world that have been turned upside down. Let's see what kinds of images these evoke for us today.

First, showing the strength of her arm, God has scattered the proud. What a pitfall pride can be! It's what happens when we become just a little too full of ourselves. When we begin counting our worth along with our achievements. When we compare ourselves with others, and imagine ourselves just a little bit better, or more holy, or more right. One of the commentators I read this week called pride "the core sin, from which arise all other aspects and expressions of a broken relationship with God and, consequently, with one another." How is our relationship with God? Broken? How about our relationship with those around us, here in this sanctuary, at

school, at work, in our broader community? Is pride getting in our way? Get ready to be scattered!

Second, as Mary declares, God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. How we wish that would happen today, right? In our nation and in the world, there are powerful people sitting on their “thrones,” assuming that their power exempts them from accountability. In Hollywood. In Alabama. In the White House. In so-called “Christian” pulpits everywhere we turn. We’ve already seen some of these powerful people get brought down. But what about our power as white, middle- to upper-class Americans, especially those of us with the male chromosome? Make no mistake, Mary says. All the powerful will be brought down. And the lowly will be lifted up to take their place.

Third, Mary boldly, brazenly declares that God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, of the 7.3 billion people in the world, approximately 795 million, or one in nine, suffer from chronic undernourishment. 780 million of these live in developing nations, far, far away. And here we sit, assuming that that’s just the way the cookie crumbles, so to speak—that we can’t help it we live in the wealthiest nation in the world. It was the luck of the draw. The lottery, more like! But guess what? God has, and will, and is turning it all upside down. Have you bought your Christmas turkey yet? Why not buy two, and give one away? Why not help God turn things upside down?

Fourth, Mary declares that God has helped her servant Israel, in remembrance of her mercy, according to the promise she made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever. As we have been hearing in recent Sundays, the story of ancient, tiny Israel is the paradigm of God’s modus operandi in the world. First, God heard their cries. And then, in one of the greatest reversals or upheavals ever, God acted by delivering them from their bondage to the prevailing powers. God lifted them up and, we might say, made them great again. Until their pride got in their way. Is there an echo in here? Whose cries is God hearing today? The world’s refugees and immigrants? It’s occupied people? Women of color, in a white man’s world?

Mary’s fifth great upheaval or reversal is really her first. Let’s listen again to her words. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” And so we see that the revolution, the upheavals, the great reversals all started with Mary herself. Just as it all starts with us. With recognizing our own lowliness, however it may have entrenched or hidden itself in our lives. It is when we finally say we are not worthy that we are. It is as we decide to give thanks for all the things the Mighty One has done for us that we feel sincerely, truly grateful. It is when we remember that God’s name—God’s incarnate word in the world—is holy, that we also remember we can be holy too.

Make no mistake. The world is about to turn.

Amen.