

Downside Up
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection: *"We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aid, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn."*
Henry David Thoreau

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 80:1-7 (adapted)

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead us like a flock!
 You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before all the tribes of your people.
 Stir up your might, and come to save us!
 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.
 O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
 We have eaten the bread of tears, and swallowed tears to drink in full measure.
 Even our neighbors see that we are paying the consequences of being unfaithful..
 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. Amen.

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Sermon: Downside Up

Mary's words to her cousin Elizabeth are familiar to us. We most often hear them in musical form – what we know as *The Magnificat*—Latin for "magnifies".

Mary rejoices because:

- God has looked with favor on her low station in life.
- God has done great things for her.
- God is merciful to those who are in awe of him.
- God has yet again demonstrated divine power
- God has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.
- God has been merciful according to God's own promises.

Mary indeed magnifies the Lord because her song is threaded with the awareness that it is

God's power that does all these things; that God does these things freely because of God's own promises, not because God has been bartered into a corner, nagged into submission or most importantly not because God doesn't have other options. God always has other options. But God has chosen to lift the downside up.

It was a surprise to Mary and no doubt to the world, that she was chosen for this opportunity to do great things for the Lord, instead of ones who might have expected—whom the world might have expected—to be chosen—the ones remarkable for wealth or fame, wisdom or education, family connections or power.

The word "opportunity" is carefully chosen and repeatedly used to remind us that Mary had agency. Mary had a choice. While in the world, Mary may have been poor and powerless, in her relationship with God, she had power over her own life and body and was free to say "yes" or "no."

Mary understood that in her opportunity to bear the salvation of God into the world, God had, certainly not for the first time, and certainly not for the last time, acted outside of human expectation, outside of human practice, to bring us not just the gift itself, but to give us a glimpse of the world as God would have it be. God envisions a world where all people have choice and power; a world where in and through all people God's gifts might be seen and delivered for the sake of the whole world.

We might be tempted to say we know that and after centuries of teaching we do know, at least intellectually, but in a lot of ways, our world still looks like Mary's world and our ways still are like the ways of the people in her world. It is perhaps easier for those without earthly power to credit God with power over their lives and the lives of others. It is perhaps more difficult for those of us with earthly power to remember and magnify the glory and power of God because we have so much power of our own; we often have the perception that we are self-created and self-sustaining.

Perhaps that is why if we were looking at Mary's song with fresh eyes, we would also find it a surprise that God has actively shattered the pride of those who thought they had reason to be proud, removed the powerful from their seats of power be they economic, governmental, educational or social, and left those who formerly had enough to go hungry. Mary's song suggests that God has not only lifted the downside up, but has actively tipped the upside down. That remains a rather startling claim because it doesn't happen much in the world and there isn't even a lot of scriptural story-telling that identifies specific instances when that has happened.

Rather, what happens is not unlike what happens in one of the seasonal Allstate "mayhem" commercials. In this episode, Mayhem is winter's accumulating snow supported by a roof that eventually collapses under Mayhem's growing weight. What history and the history of people with God shows is that when the rich become poor, the proud fall from grace and the powerful lose their thrones, it is because their way of life has collapsed under the weight of the mayhem they have created with their own choices that contribute to the unraveling of the fabric of human and holy life. God doesn't need to actively upset the apple cart of worldly success. We reach the tipping point on our own, simply because God will leave us to our own devices – the devices of self-creation, self-sustenance and self-security we often act as though we believe in more than we believe in our God.

Yet, Mary's song is a reminder and invitation, not a condemnation. Mary's song reminds us of God's power over all of life –the people who have power in this world and those who don't. Mary's song reminds us that regardless of how much choice we have in the earthly realm, we are responsible for the choices that we make – the ones that affect our own lives and the lives of those around us. Mary's song reminds us that with God, we always have choice – the choice to say "yes" or "no" to bearing God's gifts into the world. Mary's song reminds us yet again that God's imagination is bigger than ours; that God's actions are not limited to the strategic maneuvers we might make; and that God does not measure the value of human beings the way the world does.

Mary's song is an invitation to see the world through God's eyes; to lift the downside up both in our own estimation and in their status in the world that all might have life abundant. Mary's song is an

invitation to say "yes" to being the bearers of hope, love, joy, justice and mercy into the world again this year.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

O Promised One: We do wait in expectancy and hope to see your will unfold in our lives. We wait for babies to arrive, for invitations to come, for answers about jobs and the future. We wait for love to grow, for reconciliation to seem possible, for grief to fade. We wait for wedding days, for guests to come, for the phone to ring. We wait for purpose, for peace, for possibility. We wait for your Son, for You. We hold our breaths waiting for the breath of Your Spirit.

Grant us your Spirit, God, that our waiting might indeed be urgent and hopeful. That we might be partners with you and with one another, in seeing, in discovering, in hearing and in bringing about the very things we wait for. For you have planted in us the seeds of those things. Help us to nurture possibilities within ourselves and one another that they might grow and have life.

In this holy season, as we are sensitive to preparing ourselves for your Son's coming, let us be tuned as well to all those around us who are also waiting. Waiting for You and waiting for us. Let us be generous with ourselves, that those who are lonely might find a welcome in our eyes, that those who are guilty or ashamed might find forgiveness in our hearts. By the power of your Spirit, may those who are hungry eat the food we prepare, those who are poor enjoy the gifts we share, those who are hopeless feel your Son's love as we offer it in the world, those who yearn for peace and safety see us work for those things for others.

Help us to make room in our own hearts and in the world for your Son to be born anew – he who taught us to pray together...

Lord's Prayer