

A Complete Turnaround

Luke 1: 39-55

The old saying suggests that familiarity breeds contempt. Of course that's not always true. The more time we spend with some of those closest to us, the more those relationships may well deepen and blossom, and the more our love and respect grows. But when it comes to the Christmas story we may well have become so familiar with it that we no longer hear its power and its mystery. Not that we are contemptuous of this story of God taking human form and living among us, but that we miss the freshness - even the shock - that comes with an initial hearing.

Zechariah, being told by an angel that Elizabeth and he, in spite of being near the end of long lives, would have a son, John the Baptist, who would play a key role as the forerunner of the Messiah...Mary being visited by the angel Gabriel, told that she would give birth to a child who would be called Jesus, the Son of the Most High God. A band of lowly shepherd being the first to hear the message of Christ's birth - these stories announce that God is breaking into human life in a markedly new and unexpected way. As Phillips Brooks in his carol, "O Little Town Of Bethlehem", puts it "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!" It is a gift, as J.B. Phillips suggests, filled with "quiet but explosive significance," the gift of God entering human life and becoming one with us.

There was no advertisement, no advance publicity, no special privilege...Were you and I in charge of the Christmas story, were we choreographing the coming of the Son of God into the world, we likely would have planned things quite differently. Surely we would have chosen for Jesus to be born, not in an obscure, out-of-the-way, little known village of Bethlehem, but in the thick of political and cultural power - perhaps Rome itself, maybe Athens, or Alexandria, or at the very least, Jerusalem.

The good news of Christ's birth heralding peace on earth, good will to all people - this we would share, not with insignificant shepherds, but with society's "movers and shakers." Would we not want the glad tidings of Jesus' birth to be announced to those who knew how to get things done, rather than to shepherds whose word was not even considered worthy enough to be accepted in a court of law in that day and time? And the chosen parents - why a poor unlikely couple who could not even find room in a meager inn of Bethlehem? Why not have the child born to parents of note whose very name and reputation would add credibility to the story of a Savior being born?

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, noting that it is the Gospel writer Luke who tells so many of these details from which we piece together the Christmas story, writes,

Luke's Gospel is meant to make you sit up and think hard about Jesus as Lord of the whole world...The whole world needs to know that there is a different way of living, a new way of life - a way characterized by repentance and forgiveness of wrongdoing, replacing the rule of violence and hatred.

And yet isn't it astounding how quietly, how unobtrusively, Christ comes. William Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University, questions,

Don't you find it interesting that when the great Lord, the Creator of the universe, the One who hung the stars in the heavens and set the planets spinning in their courses, when this great God chose to come among us God chose to come to us as a baby?

And when that baby grew up, he told those who would be his disciples, "You cannot enter my kingdom unless you turn and become as a little child."

The truth of the matter is, God seldom acts as we would expect. Do you remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, speaking for God?

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (55:8-9).

Mary quickly discovers how true that is. Confronted by the angel Gabriel with the astonishing message that she would bear a son named Jesus, Mary quickly senses that the angel sees something in her that Mary herself could not see...Does this not precede any invitation from God, this sense that God sees us in ways we do not see ourselves? It can be jarring, can't it - this recognition that faith may well lead us in directions we had never foreseen.

Mary responds with words that provide a model of obedience. “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you have said.” (Luke 1:38). And in the days, months, and years that follow, Mary discovers that her act of obedience leads her on a journey of faith that isn’t merely a pleasant add-on to the rest of her life. But much more...it is a compelling vision of something new, a vision that can be both perplexing and engaging, both confusing and inviting.

Filled with these kinds of conflicting emotions, Mary hurries to the home of her cousin and listens with even more wonder and amazement as Elizabeth cries out to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:42-44).

In response Mary utters words of praise, “My soul glorifies/magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (1:46). These words form the beginning of a section of the Gospel that has come to be labeled “The Magnificat.”

E. Stanley Jones, noted missionary to India, once described the Magnificat as “the most revolutionary document in the world.” In it Mary affirms that through her infant son, God is bringing about a moral revolution, scattering the proud, a social and economic revolution, casting down the mighty and exalting the humble; and a spiritual revolution, bringing new life and hope where formerly there was only despair and fear.

Notice that Mary’s words are in the present tense. Mary does not say, “Someday in the future - in the sweet by-and-by - God will transform human life.” No, God is transforming human life **now**. The entire social order is being renewed and redeemed, not through armed rebellion, but through the birth of a child!...It’s a preposterous message in many ways - one that turns upside down so many of our commonly-held assumptions. Jesus comes proclaiming a startling new way of living. The least are the greatest. Adults must become like children. Those chosen for critical roles often come from the ranks of the poor and the unpolished. The greatest among us are those who take the role of a lowly servant. The “religious” are excluded from the heavenly banquet while sinners are welcomed with joy. In this baffling and perplexing realm of God, the world is being turned upside down - or perhaps more accurately, right side up!

We are faced with what one author calls the “Great Inversion.” In his book *The Divine Conspiracy* Dallas Willard asserts,

There are none in the humanly “down” position so low that they cannot be lifted up by entering God’s new order, and none in the humanly “up” position so high that they can disregard God’s point of view in their lives. The barren, the widow, the orphan, the eunuch, the alien, all models of human hopelessness, are fruitful and secure in God’s care.

What's happening within you this Advent and Christmas season? Are you ready for a complete turnaround, for a change of heart and mind, for the gift of a new perspective and worldview, for the promise of life and hope? Will you participate in God's Great Inversion, embracing God's gifts of justice, mercy, compassion, and self-giving love? That is our challenge and our opportunity this Christmas season. Amen.

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