Seventh Sunday After Pentecost/

*Christmas In July*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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July 24, 2022

*“Lullaby”* Luke 1:46b-55

The passage we just heard is something we usually hear in December, during Advent. It is usually reserved for the Fourth Sunday of Advent—the Sunday we celebrate Joy. So, hearing it here at the end of July is unusual, even odd. However, oddness and unusual is perfectly in keeping with the way the church has heard and retold this passage in earlier times.

As I was sharing with the children earlier, Mary’s song praises a God who is turning upside-down all of the cold-hearted, uncaring, unhealthy arrangements human beings have made between themselves. Mary is singing about how God is reversing and redefining human relationships, how God is going to deal with the structures of privilege and power that exclude and dishonor the lives of the poor, and many others who are also made in the image of God.

Whereas the world gives undue admiration to wealth and status, and looks down on the poor and the powerless, God, says Mary, *sees* those whom the world ignores. God sees those who are humble and pushed aside or ignored, and God loves them. And, says Mary, God is going to make a change in the world for them. God is going to transform the world through God’s love, through God’s ways of justice, and most especially, through God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

Later, the child Mary is carrying will say very much the same thing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will use almost the same language when he declares to those who have come hungry to hear his good news:

*‘Blessed are you who are poor,
   for yours is the kingdom of God.
21‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
   for you will be filled.
‘Blessed are you who weep now,
   for you will laugh.*

*22‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.
24 ‘But woe to you who are rich,
   for you have received your consolation.
25 ‘Woe to you who are full now,
   for you will be hungry.
‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
   for you will mourn and weep.*

*26‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.* [6:20b-26]

Both Mary and Jesus declare the beginning of a new world and a new order to all the things in it. And all of this will come about because God’s ways are ways of compassion and justice. Through both the mother and the son, God is telling the world of the deep and abiding love God has for all people. And because God does love us all, the rich, and the merciless arrogant will be pulled down. All of the structures in human relationships that harbor bigotry or dishonesty will be destroyed, and God’s mercy will prevail.

This is nothing less than a complete reversal of the way in which we human beings normally arrange our relationships. And as I was saying earlier, in earlier years—throughout medieval and early modern Europe, during Christmas, the church would make a very serious attempt to point of lifting-up God’s desire for justice and compassion for all people by staging all sorts of public spectacles to drive-home this point.

And so, during Advent the church would celebrate God’s reversal of things with festivals wherein everything was turned topsy-turvy and upside down. They embraced how foolish this seemed to those who did not know and love God by mocking the high status of local persons both outside and inside the church—no one was spared. And so Franciscan monks would wear their habits inside-out. They would hold their books upside down and read gibberish from them. In Constantinople (the home of the Orthodox church), the people would elect a fake patriarch who would make fun of the office and even lampoon the Eucharist.

So, when we listen to Mary’s song of praise we need to hear her joy as she challenges all of the powers-that-be that dishonor life, and all the human activity that acquires wealth by sacrificing human well-being, that disregards or does not see *all* of the people.

Now as you and I both know, despite the ancient origins of this book we call our Holy Bible, these powers of dishonor, injustice, and discrimination are still all too prevalent among us. They are part of the world that surrounds us—the world of the high and mighty…but also in our own lives. Try as hard as we might, we hardly have to look beyond our own lives to see it at work.

For example, most of us know what the work conditions are like at companies like Amazon. We know how their workers are pressed to work faster and faster, to make shorter and shorter time in filling orders. Most of know of how unsafe this can be, and how much this contributes to on-the-job injury.

The thing that made me cringe the most was hearing of how, instead of making the work of fulfilling orders easier or safer for their workers, Amazon places free ibuprofen dispensers throughout their warehouses so that instead of rest, workers’ tired, over-worked muscles would not feel the pain.

Now, do *not* raise your hands, but instead think to yourself: how many Amazon boxes are at home in your recycling bin right at this moment? This is our bad news: that all of these things are around us all of the time, and that we too are susceptible to them.

So, Mary’s song is more than a song of praise. It is also a song of promise to all who have not experienced the fullness of God’s love because of the human activity that continues to delay or attempts to thwart it.

Mary’s song is a lullaby—not like the ones meant to lull children to sleep. Rather, Mary’s is a song that is meant to be a soothing refrain, a promise to all who are weary and sad and in need of assurance that God sees us and cares.

But what is truly amazing about this lullaby, this new song of caring and promise and reversal, is that it comes to us on the lips of the one who first received God’s desire to enact this in the world through her body.

Mary, for two thousand years, we have honored her and lifted her up as the paragon of virtue, faithful trust, and obedience that she is. However, in doing this I wonder if we sometimes forget that Mary was also about as humble and lowly as you could get.

She was young and was not of the rich or ruling class. And now, she was also an unwed mother-to-be. This was something that was not only a sin in her time and place, it was also dangerous. Women could be severely punished for being in such a predicament.

But it is her very identity that exemplifies God’s desire to reverse many of the notions we have come to hold important and worthy. In her day, Mary would have been a scandal and a cautionary tale. However, God makes her the bearer of God’s good news in the most intimate and profound way possible.

In the same way God is acting through Mary’s body, we may also come to understand and receive how our bodies, our lives, are also meant to carry God’s message of love and hope into the world. Through our choices and through the actions and activities that rise from our choices, we are meant to bring alive the message of God’s love and justice in our day and time. We, too, are meant to sing Mary’s song of soothing and nurture.

We are meant to participate in the reversal, topsy-turvy ways of God’s love; to *see* the humble and underprivileged; and to offer our hand in friendship and assistance. Like Mary, we may even become caught-up in God’s wildly joyous intentions for us. Intentions of peace, plenty, justice, and wholeness. We may be, we *are* invited to participate in actions, and into places and gestures that make for more goodness, even beyond our imaginations.

Friends, as we celebrate Christmas in July, I pray we will remember and celebrate the Joy God wants to bring into all of our lives. I pray we will revel in God’s reversal of fortunes and sing with Mary her song of praise and promise our whole life long. Amen.