



Advent Love

Hebrews 10:5-10 & Luke 1:39-55

Advent 4 - December 22, 2024

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As children, one of the wondrous things about Christmas was always the element of suspense. We were surprised by what we received under the beautifully decorated tree; delighted by what we discovered in the stockings hung by the chimney with care. We were delightfully amazed if it snowed on Christmas and made the day seem magical to us. We were startled by how quickly and abruptly it was all over. Christmas provided for us a great sense of surprise as children.

As we became adults and then parents, that astonishment was replaced with the sense of joy we took in the response of the children around the Christmas tree, whether these children were our own, or nephews and nieces, or the children of friends with which we shared the holidays. Our childish surprise has been turned to joy and satisfaction in our observation of those who were truly enjoying the holiday.

As we stand in that liminal space between the ending of Advent and the glorious celebration of Christmas Day and the season that follows it, Mary has some surprising words for us in this passage from the Gospel of Luke. Mary's sung response to the pronouncement that she is with child is filled not with talk of Herald angels or shepherds or three stately Magi, the characters we associate with Christmas, rather her song is filled with praise for the upsetting nature of the appearance of God in the midst of the ordinary everyday world that she (and all of us really) inhabit.

Listen closely to what Mary actually voiced that day:

[God's] 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.

This indeed is a startling, surprising, remarkable, even radical proclamation that this young slip of a girl sings, bearing witness to a God who is bound and determined to upset the status quo, to breathe life into death and restoration for the suffering that surrounds her.

William Willimon, the great Methodist theologian, puts it this way:

Mary is told that she is to have a baby by the Holy Spirit, and she breaks into song. But it is no lullaby that Mary sings. It is a war cry, a battle song. Through Mary, God's promises for suffering Israel will be accomplished. There is nothing spiritual or private, inner and subjective about what God is intending to do, according to Mary's song. God is moving politically, economically, strategically. Those in power are to be cast down. The lowly and the oppressed are to be lifted up. A great transfer of power is being prophesied here.

Advent, in its waning days, still has something powerful to speak to us here ... this great exchange, this great alteration to the status quo will not come by revolution or by steady political programmatic strategy and management; this great change will occur because of the direct intervention of God. Surprise! This is what Christmas is really all about: God's entrance into this world so that the poor will

be raised up, so that the hungry will be filled, so that the proud and the powerful, who care not for the poor or the hungry will be cast down. In short, for the complete redemption of all creation and human society. This is the great exchange, the great surprise.

Of the many elements of the great Lessons and Carols service that we celebrate annually at Christmastime, possibly my favorite part is not the lighting of the candles, nor the singing of some of our favorite carols or even the great anthems offered by our marvelous choir; it is instead the simple bidding prayer that is invoked near the beginning of the service.

Fashioned after the bidding prayer that originally was crafted in Cambridge, England over one hundred years ago at the first Lessons and Carols service, it includes these words spoken by the pastor here, but by the Dean of King's College there:

And particularly at this time, let us remember before God the poor, the cold, the hungry, the oppressed; the sick and them that mourn; the lonely and the unloved; the aged and the little children; and all those who know not the Lord Jesus, or who love him not, or who by sin have grieved his heart of love.

Eric Milner-White, Dean of King's College in 1918, wrote those words that echo the proclamation of Mary's song; that this birth that we anticipate, that this in-breaking of God in our sin-sick and weary world is about the lifting up of those who are lowly and forgotten; those who just don't seem to fit in or find it difficult to just keep it all together.

The season of Advent points us to the time when God will set all things right; when redemption will be thorough and complete within all creation. This great action, this great exchange of God's dropping the royal robes of divinity and becoming like us, will be extended to all creation, including you and me and all humankind and all creation alike. This is the hope that Advent bears and that leads directly to our celebration of Christmas: in this One to be born in Bethlehem, we have all been included.

Karl Barth, preaching in the prison at Basel, Switzerland, upon the words of the angelic pronouncement to the shepherds on that first Christmas eve, proclaimed to the prisoners there and to we, imprisoned souls here:

But we hear this news – don't we? – thinking: 'Why should I be concerned? This is entirely a matter between him and them.' In contrast, the angel of the Lord points to Bethlehem, saying, 'for to you is born this day a Savior.' For your sake God was not content to be God but willed to become man; for you he emptied himself that you may be exalted; for you he gave himself that you may be lifted up and drawn unto him. The wondrous deed brought him no gain, fulfilled no need of his. It was accomplished only for you, for us. The Christmas story then is a story that is enacted with us and for us.

What God has done in Jesus Christ, God has done not for himself; it fulfills no need in him, but rather changes the world for us and for all creation. God empties himself of divinity so that we might be filled with the things of God. And those things of God are so well described in Mary's song: care for those in need, release to those who are in bonds, the lonely and the outcast finding a home. These are the things of Advent AND Christmas; these are the things that Christ brings us and call us to live with these things in our hearts and minds. This is the radical good news of Advent and Christmas; the good news that a slip of a girl brings us with a powerful and beautiful song, bursting with the praise of a God who loves the world enough to change the world ... starting with each of us. This too is Advent.