

The Upside-Down Kingdom

Luke 1:46-56

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2010

If you go out Christmas caroling without songbooks, you soon realize that most people only know the first verse of most of the songs. I'm afraid Mary's song—what we call the Magnificat—is one of those songs. The first verse is beautiful but more or less what we would expect: "I praise God and rejoice in God as my Savior, because he has chosen me—of all people, a poor peasant girl—to be the mother of the Messiah. I will always be remembered as a person whom God blessed because of this great thing God has done for me." If you were staging the story as a musical it would make sense for Mary to burst into song this way: "God is so good, he's so good to me." It does sound a little self-centered, but Mary is a teenage girl. What do you expect?

Then we come to the second verse of the song and Mary goes to meddling. After a little bridge about God's mercy, Mary changes keys into a song about how that mercy plays out in history. She uses the past tense—"he has scattered the proud"—so you could read this as a litany of what God has done in Israel's past. But most scholars think that Mary is using the past tense the way prophets use it, talking about the future as if it's already happened. The future Mary sees happening as a result of what God is doing in choosing a peasant girl to bring his Messiah into the world is a radical vision; it's a world turned upside down. This is, whether she knows it or not, a vision of the kingdom of God, the kingdom that we still pray will come on earth as it has already come in heaven. I think Luke the writer sees this part of the song as a mini-overture giving us snippets of the themes that are to come in the gospel. They are not the themes that most of us associate with Mary or with Christmas.

One preacher has suggested that we ought to send out Christmas cards with a traditional picture of Mary on the front, but inside it would have the message: "He has scattered the proud. He has brought down the powerful. He has sent the rich away empty. Merry Christmas!" If we actually quoted Mary on a Christmas card people would think we were being political, or revolutionary. E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India—who was related to someone in our congregation, I think—said that the Mary's song is "the most revolutionary document in the world." The Bible scholar William Barclay called the song "a bombshell." He said people have read it so often they have forgotten its "revolutionary tenor." It takes "the standards of the world and turns them upside down." Even Martin Luther said that the Magnificat "comforts the lowly and terrifies the rich."

Mary is drawing on the Hebrew heritage of the prophets. Her song takes its form from the song of Hannah, giving thanks when she learned she was pregnant with the prophet Samuel. But then Mary draws many themes from the prophets who proclaimed that God's action in freeing the oppressed Hebrew slaves in Egypt from the wealthy self-serving Pharaoh was not a fluke—it was a revelation of God's nature. God is not done, they said, with bringing justice into the world. God has brought down kings—Canaanite kings, Israelite kings, Babylonian kings—in order to lift up his lowly people. And one day God will send his own king—in a sense God will *become* the king of his people—and you will know the everlasting rule of the Messiah, the kingdom of God. That day will not mean the shoring up of the status quo. That will be the day when everything changes. Power will no longer come from horses and chariots or the end of a gun;

every sword and spear will be shattered. The rich will no longer take advantage of the poor, cheating them in their dealings, charging them interest, using them as slaves, taking their land which God gave them in perpetuity. All that will change, and God will lift up the lowly and bring down the high and mighty. That is not something that is alien to the Old Testament. Almost everything Mary says can be found in some form in the prophets. She is echoing an old song, but she is saying that because of this baby in my womb this is actually going to happen here and now. Here we go! Woo hoo!

Donald Kraybill, America's foremost scholar writing about the Amish, wrote a book out of his own Anabaptist faith on Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God, and he called it *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. In the first chapter he begins with the Magnificat. In Mary's vision, he says, there will be five types of people who will be startled and surprised. The first three groups are the proud, the rich, and the mighty—they will be toppled from the top of the social pyramid. The other two groups are the poor and the hungry—they will take a surprising ride to the top. Mary really expects the coming of the Messiah to flip her social world upside down. She is not talking about the metaphorically poor and hungry in spirit. She means the lower class and the starving. Those are the ones God in his mercy will lift up to the top and value more than anyone else. It's like we're going through life on one ladder—call it the kingdoms of this world. On that ladder the ones at the top are the rich and proud and powerful, who are pretty much the same people, while the ones at the bottom are the poor and hungry and people like Mary. But now God is setting up a new ladder beside it, the kingdom of God. And on that ladder, the poor and hungry are at the top; they are the ones that are blessed by God. But the rich and proud and powerful are moved to the bottom of the ladder. Perhaps if they repent and trust God instead of their own power and their own riches, they can be blessed by God, but first they have to be knocked off their perches.

Can we really deal with what Mary is saying, since most of us don't really qualify as poor or hungry? Talk radio would say she sounds like a socialist, that she's positively un-American. But I'm not worried about political labels. I'm more worried that Mary knows more about God than I do. Is that God she's singing about the one that I'm worshiping this Advent? Can I really join in her song? James Kay from Princeton Seminary asks a good question: "Can the God who is going to knock the powerful off their peacock thrones, their stock exchange seats, their professional chairs, and their benches of judgment really be *our* God?"

When we celebrate the birth of the Messiah, the coming of Jesus into the world as our Savior, we are celebrating the arrival of a kingdom that turns our values upside down. That theme runs all through the gospel of Luke. Even the fact that the angels chose to announce the birth to shepherds rather than to royalty or clergy should tell you something—and then that the new king would be found not in a palace but wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. When Jesus begins his ministry in Luke 4, what does he start with? He chooses this text from Isaiah for his inaugural address: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." When he says he is proclaiming "the acceptable year of the Lord," Jesus means that he is announcing the real-world application of the ancient Jewish law of Jubilee, when all debts were forgiven and all slaves set free. That is what the kingdom of God will accomplish.

Luke reports a scene in chapter 6 in which Jesus pronounces blessings and woes. Jesus says blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated. Woe to the rich, the full, the laughing, and those whom all speak well of. Sounds pretty upside down to me! Jesus says that

those who have it good now are going down, and those who are on the losing end at the moment will be lifted up by God in his kingdom.

There are lots of other examples in Luke. The least of you is the greatest (9:48). Jesus thanks God that he has hidden the truth from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to children (10:21). The rich man goes to Hades while the beggar Lazarus goes to father Abraham (16:19f). The rich ruler literally “goes away empty” and sorrowful when Jesus tells him to sell what he has and give the money to the poor (18:18f). Jesus says that in kingdom the first (the rich and powerful) will be last, and the last (the poor and incapable) will be first (13:29-30). When you give a dinner, Jesus says, don’t invite your friends. What? Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Make friends with *them*.

So if we take Mary seriously, and if we take Jesus seriously, we can’t just observe Advent as a season of shopping. We have to understand it as a reminder that the kingdom of God is coming, and all the commercial and materialistic values of our culture are leading us away from the kingdom. If our goals in life are to be rich and powerful and well-respected, we are headed in the wrong direction. We are headed for a fall. At a minimum, Mary’s song makes us think about doing something for the poor in this season. But honestly, I don’t think that taking a food basket to someone is quite what Mary has in mind. She has in mind a change in the whole system, a change in the way the world works. I don’t know how God is going to bring that about, but I want to be part of what God is doing and not reinforcing the system God is going to bring down.

Let me use the recent elections as an example. I will never tell you who to vote for. But I *will* give you a biblical criterion for evaluating leaders. You should ask yourself: If this person is elected, will it be good news for the poor? Because that is what Jesus says he is about, and what Mary said he would be about: good news for the poor. I don’t need to be thinking first of my own self-interest, but about the poor. I don’t think there was much good news for the poor in the recent elections.

It seems to me that we are moving in the opposite direction of the kingdom of God, moving toward the kingdom of Mammon. When I began my ministry (1976) the top 1% of Americans earned 9% of the income; in the last year for which we have good numbers (2007), the top 1% earned 23.5%. How could that be good news for the poor? The inequality in the US today between the rich and the poor is as bad as it was in Argentina 60 years ago. You’d have to go back almost a hundred years in US history to find the disparity in income this large.

Nicholas Kristof asked a question in the New York Times on November 11: “Would we really want to be the kind of plutocracy where the richest 1 percent possess more than the bottom 90 percent? Oops! That’s already us. The top 1 percent of Americans owns 34 percent of America’s private net worth... The bottom 90 percent owns just 29 percent.” What does the coming of the upside-down kingdom of God mean in that situation? What kind of change in tax policy and the economy would be good news to the poor?

What does any of this have to do with Advent? Aren’t we supposed to be celebrating the coming of Jesus to save us from our sins? Well yes, but one of the sins he is saving us from is our slavish devotion to Money, our notion that how well off we are is how well off we are. And if we listen to Mary, the kingdom that Jesus brought into the world, the one that is still growing secretly and will one day be completely manifest, will turn our social order upside down. Do we believe for one minute that the poor are blessed and the rich are in grave danger? Do we believe that God will *really* lift up the lowly and cast down the proud? It’s right there at the heart of the

Christmas message. The story is about God choosing the lowly, God *becoming* lowly. Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor.

That's at the heart of the kingdom's values. If we welcome Jesus as our ruler, don't we want to obey him? Don't we want to be like him? "Have this mind among yourselves, the attitude that Jesus had, who though he had everything and all power emptied himself of all of that and humbled himself and took the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:5-6). That's the Christmas spirit and the spirit of the upside down kingdom. At the end of his book (p. 256) Donald Kraybill proposes a pledge of allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the Lord of the worldwide kingdom of God and to the values for which it stands—one kingdom, under God, with compassion and forgiveness for all."