

The Kin-dom: It's Upside Down  
Luke 1:46-55  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

A young woman was pregnant. She wasn't a queen or a rich woman, but just a poor woman from a working class family. Joseph, the man she would spend her life with, was a hard worker – a carpenter, a craftsman. They came from a small town, a village – the type of place where everyone knows everyone, and everyone watches out for each other's children. Children – they were really more about utility. Having children gave a woman value in their culture. It also had an economic advantage as many hands make light work and fathers liked to have someone to whom to pass the family business, or at least some free labor. It's not that there wasn't joy with the news of pregnancy, but often pregnancies were laced with so much else – fear of losing children (after all so many died at such a young age), the reality of another mouth to feed (which under Roman authority wasn't always so easy for poor, working class people). They simply didn't live in a time of gender reveal parties, color coordinated nurseries, and baby shower brunches.

And yet, today we hear words recorded by Luke as the song of Mary – the joy-filled and far-seeing celebration of what this pregnancy meant.

Here was a simple young woman of no notable position. She lived in a time when Rome was in charge, when the Jewish people had pseudo freedom – as long as everything went okay, they were basically free to rule themselves. And, the lower class folk could largely fly under the radar. If they just lived out their lives and did their jobs and paid their taxes and followed the rules, they were virtually unnoticed.

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Meanwhile, Luke tells us just a few verses after this, that a census was being taken, that people were to go and register in the towns from which their families had come. We might imagine, much as it does for many today, that the taking of a census raised anxiety for some. What might this mean? What if they couldn't get there to be counted? Why did the government want this information? How high would their taxes be? What were the other implications?

The reality is that Mary and Joseph and others like them would have known that they just needed to keep their heads down and go about their business and be obedient citizens.

And yet, the words of Mary's song, which we often read as simply the song of an excited mother, were about so much more than herself. Mary not only celebrated the child she would raise in her household, but envisioned a world very different from the one in which they lived...envisioned a world that turned all the usual expectations on their heads.

“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.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary's song was not just a personal song of celebration upon the news of her pregnancy. It was not just the song of an expectant mother looking forward to meeting her child. Mary's song was a song of expectation of something more than a baby. It was a song filled with

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:46b-55, NRSV.

expectation for a world in which the struggles of the poor would be no longer...the power of rich would be shared...the hierarchy that controlled their lives would be turned upside down.

Throughout Advent we have been on a journey exploring the metaphor of the “kin-dom of God.” We have been asking questions about what we hear when we take out the patriarchal, top down language of king-dom and replace it with the language of kin-dom, language that embraces the reality of our connectedness to one another and the vision of God for fairness, equity, and justice.

And today, as we continue to explore that metaphor, we see another aspect of God’s intended world – which is one in which the distinction between poor and rich disappears...one in which the hungry have something to eat and no one is feasting to fatness just because they can.

Mary’s song illustrates well this idea of kin-dom. It does that first as she moves from her personal experience of bearing a child and turns outward to see the implications of “God with us” for the whole world. See, Mary knows what it means to live as kin...to be connected...to live a world where my joy is your joy and your pain is my pain. And so, she cannot stay turned inward too long. Yes, this is a celebration that begins with the news of her pregnancy, but it quickly looks out into a world of God’s envisioning, a world that is very different than the one she knows.

And which of us doesn’t, especially upon the birth of a child, hope for a better world? Which of us doesn’t look at the world with our little ones in mind and wish for something more, even commit to work for something better?

But what does that “better” look like?

Unfortunately, the dream hasn’t changed much from Mary’s day because we haven’t made the progress that one might have hoped. Still we dream of a world where the proud are

scattered...where the distance between the powerful and the powerless is not so great...where the rich don't get richer while the poor get poorer but where everyone has enough. Still we dream of a world where the servant is regarded with respect and the powerful share rather than hoard their power.

And this is a challenge for us because even though we claim to follow Jesus, even though we hear his own proclamations about this kind of world, even though we watch him model faithful living as he feeds the hungry and heals the broken, as he welcomes the stranger and forgives the sinner...even with all of this, the reality is that it is easier for us to admire Jesus than it is for us truly follow him.

And some of that challenge comes because whether we like to admit it or not, we are the power people, we are the people of the dominant culture. We don't have to have the bank account of Bill Gates or the fame of Lebron James to be part of the structure of power. And so we are challenged, because if we really listen, both the song of the Mary and the life of Jesus call for a dismantling of these structures. And that means our lives would change.

Remember, Mary was *not* part of the dominant culture of her day. She had no power other than the power of hope. This song "is not the voice of the powerful of the earth speaking here, but the voices of the marginalized and relatively powerless..."<sup>2</sup> Both the voice of Mary and the voice of the early Christian community fall into this category. They did not have the power that we know, but they held on to hope. And, in this song, we see Mary not only sing with joy and celebration, but with hope and courage.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen A. Cooper, "Luke1:39-45 (46-55) Exegetical Perspective", *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 97.

We often forget that it took courage for Mary to sing these words. It took courage for her to speak of the possibility of power structures changing, of people like her being lifted up, of hungry people being fed, and of the rich and powerful being brought down.

So, what do we do with this? After all, as we already noted, in our world, we are the rich and the powerful. We are those with choices and control, those with resources and privileges. And if we remember that and listen to the words of Mary's song, we can actually be driven to despair rather than to hope. After all, we can hear it as an indictment, if not of us personally, certainly of the systems within which we live.

But, as Stephen A. Cooper reminds us, "Luke's motif of God's reversal of fortunes (vv.51-53) is not intended to raise violent resistance or to drive the wealthy and powerful to despair; these verses must rather be read in light of the examples later in this Gospel – say, of the rich ruler (18:18-30) or Zacchaeus (19:1-10) – where the well-off are exhorted to deal with their wealth in a way that brings them into a positive relation with the poor in order to partake in the same promised salvation."<sup>3</sup>

It took courage for Mary to sing these words, to proclaim a world turned upside down from the way things were.

And it takes courage for us to do more than admire her joy. It takes courage for us to truly embrace these words and to use our power and influence to begin to make them a reality.

What would it be like if we lived in a world where not only was there enough for everyone, but where everyone actually had enough? What would it be like if we lived in a world where opportunity was not determined by the color of your skin or the annual income of the household in which you were raised? What would it be like if people in power didn't just boldly

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen A. Cooper, "Luke1:39-45 (46-55) Exegetical Perspective", *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 97.

represent the powerless to whom they never even speak but actually invited those people into the conversation?

See, this is the world that Mary proclaimed. This is the world that she saw as possible. This is the world that we are to help create even when, and especially when, it asks us to give something up.

The reality is that we like to read these stories around the birth of Jesus and simply sit in the glow of new life. But, if we are honest, these stories ask something of us. They ask us not only to welcome baby Jesus into our hearts and onto our mantels, but they ask us to shape our lives to be those who help create the upside-down, equitable, door-thrown-wide-open kin-dom of God's intention.

May it be so.