

Blessed Upside Down

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Isaiah 35:1-10 Luke 1:47-55

I. The story looks different, from the underside. History, official history, usually belongs to the victor. It sings the songs of the mighty, not the broken tunes of the lovers and the losers. The lyrics of blessing from the underside are filed somewhere deep in our collective memory. We dimly recognize their truth if ever they come out; but it can take a long, long time.... If it happens at all. History from the top down is not to be confused with truth. Official stories and myths aren't the same as God's honest understanding. One of the extraordinary things about the New Testament is that it contains the stories of little people, rather than just the rich and famous. Part of what makes it sacred is that it is full of holy little *human* details that the official historians of that age would have been uninterested in, or denied. But just ask Mary, the mother of Jesus. History looks different from the underside. And thanks to the writer of Luke's Gospel, we have a little glimpse of that view, the view from Mary's angle: The hope, the joy. The blessing.

II. Some day she will be known as the mother of Jesus, but as yet she is not known at all; she is nothing but an obscure young woman who is pregnant. Mary goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, in the country of Judea. In the moments when they meet, both of them understand that Mary is carrying within her something more than a child. She is carrying the future. She is carrying hope. She looks forward to the day when the poor will be vindicated, and the mighty brought low. Mary, the young girl, Mary betrothed but not yet married: Mary sings, or says or shouts the words which Luke's gospel captures so beautifully in verse. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.... Henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for one who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is God's name..." Something in this moment causes Mary to understand that she is being called to a special purpose. A God who is able to turn the world upside down, who can reverse the fortunes of the vanquished and lift up those who are invisible, is calling her. "...God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, and put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree."

Mary understands that within her she carries one who represents hope for a little land that has hit bottom! Occupied by armies, used and abused for the gain of a small and wealthy group of people, losing its sense of who it is and whose it is...this land desperately needs hope. It needs deliverance. And now, Mary cries out, in keeping with the prophets of old, proclaims that One born among the downtrodden is to be their deliverer...

III. In the days when Mary spoke her words of promise, she would not have been considered qualified to speak at all, about matters of faith, or about matters of the world. She was part of a captive people. She was pregnant and single. The princes and the religious establishments of the ancient world didn't much care what poor women said to each other, up in the hill country or anywhere else. Then as now, History just wasn't interested in what people like Mary had to say.

Here in the Gospel of Luke, we have a record, a story told over and over, written down and passed around until it got called scripture. It is the story of a young woman's words of defiant blessing and victory in an impossible time of defeat. And there is something about it powerful enough to make the whole world stop and listen. Mary, singing the downside up. Mary the prophet, teaching a lesson about blessing and hope to all the would-be experts, the priests and the pastors and the pundits. Mary, giving a tutorial on what real power is, to the politicians and the princes. Isn't it strange? Even with the Gospel of Luke in easy reach of each of us, the official version of Christmas still makes Mary meek and mild, turns a fire and brimstone preacher woman into a sweet soft well dressed vision in blue and gold. I can almost hear her laughing: laughing with joy at the certainty of God's over-whelming victory over the history writers and the rulers and the oppressors of her land.... Laughing with joy at the promise she carries in her belly and in her bones. Laughing with joy at surprising news about who God is and what God wants for humanity, surprising news from the bottom up.

IV. Sometimes, as a twenty-first century follower of Christ, it's easy to get discouraged. From 1992 to 2009, I personally worked in the midst of one of the more challenged neighborhoods in this rich nation. The

idea that God was blessing the poor of this land often strained belief. I remember walking with a group of fellow neighborhood organizers down the street behind our church one Saturday morning, stopping and talking to a woman in front of a very beat up home, in that place where dealing crack, heroin, meth and prostitution were the thriving industries. She wanted to know what we were up to walking through there. I said something about trying to create some community. She laughed harshly. “This isn’t a neighborhood, it is a war zone,” she said. “And I am going to get my kids out of here just as soon as I can.”

The group of people I walked with persisted in its efforts. We were able to make some significant improvements for one long street: home ownership, decent affordable rental housing, a decrease in violent crime, and yes, even a taste of neighborhood. But every one of us can testify it isn’t easy to sing that song. It isn’t easy to keep on pressing for change. Sometimes it tests our faith. It’s been a couple of millennia plus a few years since Mary started shouting and singing. And it is still hard to see much evidence that the view she has, of God turning the world around, has gotten very far. Sometimes it looks as though the gap between rich and poor, powerful and weak—the gap seems to be growing wider, not narrower. When I listen today to media commentary, and the strident negativism of privileged arch-conservatives and their allies, it seems like the view of privilege looking down its collective nose at those who don’t have much hasn’t changed a great deal since the days of Jesus. Who will write the stories our children read about these, *our* days? What will the official version be? Will the stories of the poorest and the most vulnerable make the report? It’s easy to get discouraged. And the dynamics in our nation are mirrored, reflected and magnified around the globe. Wealth and power still write most history. Poverty and suffering hardly get a footnote. Too often prestige and might still make right.

Mary is still singing, singing the downside up. It might be reasonable to give up on Mary’s revisionist approach to cruel history. Where is the evidence of a God who will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts? Mary’s view, Mary’s song, Mary’s shout, is so refreshing, so faithful to the living God we know down deep inside our souls- better to stick to her way, against all odds! It’s better to sing her song. It’s better to live by her hopes. Because even losing, even defeat with that song on our lips, that prayer in our hearts, her courage in us—in the end that’s better than winning all the rest. It’s better than victory at the cost of our souls.

V. Mary’s bones long ago turned to dust. The child she carried in her was one day to be nailed to a tree. And from generation to generation after her, those who have sung out, spoken out, cried out for a new world, have been hammered down into the dust with her. But their songs will not be silenced. God does not forget God does not miss a beat; God does not buy the sanitized version. The judge, ultimately, is not the history books. The final word belongs to a God more compassionate and more just than any nation’s royal court jesters. God will hear the songs turned downside up, and the ballads of the broken turned to psalms of glory. God will hear even the whispers of the little people....

Mary, Mary, you had a baby. Maybe you thought he was going to be a King. Some have even called him King Jesus. Pretty strange king. He never had anything, had no home to call his own. Had no kingly court—he spoke from under trees; he wandered in the hills and showed up on the edge of town. He had no power. He told the one person who ever dared to strike a blow in his defense to lay down his weapon. On the cross, he forgave his enemies. And in his weakness, in his vulnerability, even in his harshest words, he had more love than any one had ever seen.

Still we’re waiting. Still we are struggling to make a dent, knowing that it probably won’t make the papers, won’t be remembered. Mary, still the history is being written from the top down. But some day, it won’t be that way any more. Some day, we will have sung the downside up and the upside down and in the place of mountains of greed and valleys of despair there will be a new mountain, a blessed mountain of justice and love.

On that day we will meet you and we will laugh aloud with you. Together we will process up that mountain of God, with the ancient prophet Isaiah, “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”