

THE MIGHTY ONE HAS DONE GREAT THINGS

ISAIAH 61:1-4; LUKE 1:46-55
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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DECEMBER 17, 2017/THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

I've talked a lot about waiting this Advent. I've talked about being awake and alert and watchful, not only for the coming of Christ at Christmas, but also for his coming again in glory.

I've talked a lot about the ways in which we should wait—about living expectant, obedient, and hopeful lives.

This morning I want to focus more on what we're waiting for. I want to talk about the content of that hope—about what things are going to look like when Christ's kingdom really does come, on earth as in heaven.

One of the things I like to do is to dig around in common phrases and expressions that roll easily off the tongue but which perhaps we don't think as carefully about as we ought to.

Phrases like "the hope of Christmas." What precisely do we mean by this?

Well, I spent a bit of time this week rummaging around in my bible and in my brain and came up with a sort of aggregate of what many Christians hope for (whether they are aware of it or not).

We hope for mercy, forgiveness, new life, eternal life.

We hope for the promise of a new heart that beats in sync with our Maker, as promised by the prophet Ezekiel.

We hope for relief from pain, for relational wholeness, for freedom from the burden of crippling doubts and unmanageable burdens.

We hope for justice and peace, *shalom* for all of creation. We hope for lions with lambs, for swords into plowshares.

We hope that we will be loved and healed and restored, despite all that we have contributed to the brokenness of a broken world—all that we have done and all that we have left undone, as the prayer book of my Anglican colleagues has us recite each day.

We hope for no more tears.

We hope to *be with God*. And to be able to stand it.

We hope for nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth.

It's quite a cocktail of hope that we embrace, that we cling to, as Christians.

Everything will be all right. All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

I hope for all of these things and many more besides.

But one of the deepest hopes I have—at Christmas and throughout the year—is for the Great Reversal that our texts this morning point toward.

We often like to speak, in Christian circles, about the God who descends, who comes down, who is somehow nearest to those on the bottom.

I suspect that some of us implicitly think that all this talk about God's joining humanity "at the bottom" is kind of like the charitable side of God.

God is, after all, very, very big and very, very powerful and is the sovereign ruler over all that is.

This coming to be with, this coming *as one of* the lowly ones is, we perhaps imagine, a kind of brief interlude in the life and nature of God. As if God periodically pauses from his ordinary, more God-like activities to spare a sentiment for the downtrodden.

But Christmas tells us that this is no interlude, no temporary mode of operating. It is the very nature of who God is, how God loves, and what God wants.

We could (and should) spend a lifetime plumbing the depths of what this actually means.

But whatever else it means, at the very least it says that those whose primary experience in life is of not fitting or not belonging or failing to measure up or constantly struggling and straining are the ones who are, in some sense, closest to the very heart of God.

The refugee whose primary experience of the world is dislocation and disorientation...

The poor young woman who wonders how she will possibly feed her children...

The lonely kid on the playground who nobody bothers to try to understand...

The social outcast who smells bad and stutters so terribly that he can't have a normal conversation...

The orphans of war...

The victims of years of oppressive racism...

The couple struggling with infertility or the loss of a child...

Those who face mental and physical disabilities...

The elderly woman groping through the fog of dementia, wondering why she can't remember her husband's name or face...

The middle-aged man who has failed at everything he has tried in life...

The homeless and poor...

The neglected, the unattractive, the forgettable...

The ones whose actions make it virtually impossible to like them...

The losers and the misfits, the awkward and the rejected, the poor and the needy, the lonely, the ugly and the embarrassing, the incompetent and inconvenient...

The ones whose primary experience in life is of being on the wrong end of the score, of being on the outside looking in, of not having enough, of being ignored and mistreated, of not being seen.

These ones, the gospel of Jesus impossibly says, will be first.

These ones, I think, are the ones for whom passages like Isaiah 61 and Mary's song from Luke *most* sound like good news.

They will no longer be defined by the cruel and merciless standards of a world that doesn't know what or how to value. They will no longer be judged by what they are not or what they cannot do, but by who they are, who they were created to be.

They will receive love and acceptance in place of mocking scorn and cold rejection. They will hear "yes" instead of "no," "welcome!" instead of "go away."

They will be seen truly, maybe for the first time, for what and for who they are. And, perhaps most importantly, for *whose* they are.

They will know that God is different—that God sees differently, that God values differently, that God loves differently than everything their experience has taught them about how human lives are measured.

And they will not only know it intellectually, but they will *experience* it.

This, for me, is the hope of Christmas.

This is the hope that our texts set before us on this Third Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah speaks of:

- Good news for the oppressed
- Binding up the brokenhearted
- Proclaiming liberty to captives
- Release to the prisoners
- A day of vengeance (from the one who can truly be trusted with such a thing!)

The year of God's favour, mourning being turned into gladness and praise. A divine rebuilding project.

And of course it's impossible for us to hear these words and not think of Jesus. In Luke 4, Jesus comes to his hometown Nazareth, marches off to church, and appoints himself the morning's Scripture reader. He takes the scroll of Isaiah and reads the very words you heard in church this morning:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he sat down and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

(The people were initially quite pleased with Jesus, until they discovered that the day of the Lord's favour included their enemies, at which point they tried to kill him... But that's another sermon.)

Release. Recovery. Freedom. Favor. Good news.

For all those for whom the world makes no room. From the Holy One upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests.

Mary's song celebrates the fulfillment of Isaiah's hope. The Magnificat anticipates the child that she will bear, the coming of God's Messiah who has:

- Scattered the proud
- Brought down the powerful
- Lifted up the lowly
- Filled the hungry with good things
- Sent the rich away empty

These are the “great things” that the mighty one has done. Mary’s song has deep echoes of Isaiah’s “good news to the poor.”

And we notice that in Mary’s song the Mighty One not only brings good news to the poor, but bad news for the proud, the powerful, the rich!

This should probably give us more pause than it often does. We tend to naturally read ourselves as the recipients of comfort and good news, but perhaps this is not always the case.

Brian Zahnd points this out in quote that I came across recently. He noticed that his social location as an American Christian has much more in common with the rich and the powerful than the lowly and the hungry:

I have a problem with the Bible, but all is not lost. I just need to read it standing on my head. I need to change my perspective. **If I can accept that the Bible is trying to lift up those who are unlike me, then perhaps I can read the Bible right.**¹

The Bible is trying to lift up those who are unlike me.

And it’s interesting that Mary’s song is present tense! The Lord *has done* these things.

This is strange, isn’t it? At Mary’s stage in the story, Jesus hasn’t even done anything yet. He hasn’t preached or baptized or performed any miracles.

He hasn’t overthrown any rulers or scattered the proud.

There are still plenty of poor people who are exploited by the rich! The oppressive Roman Empire marches on. Jesus hasn’t fixed anything!

¹ <https://brianzahnd.com/2014/02/problem-bible/>

He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been born!!

But Mary knows that her child will change things. She knows—somehow—that the baby in her womb marks the turning point of God's story. She knows that his kingdom, strange though it is, and slow as it may sometimes seem in its coming, will have no end.

She knows that her unborn baby is the object of her people's longing, that he is the object of all of creation's longing.

On Friday night I was talking with a friend who was sort of groaning at a sign that her parents had put on their front lawn. Perhaps you've seen signs like it?

Keep Christ in Christmas.

She understood what her parents were trying to communicate but she feared that it would be interpreted as just another Christian complaining that Christmas wasn't "Christian enough," just another Christian trying to make sure that their views get the most airtime.

I share her unease. I think that such signs and complaints uttered in coffee shops and (perhaps) church foyers are often little more than attempts by Christians to reassert cultural influence and power.

We want to control the message. We don't like to see our influence waning, the meaning of the season being drowned out in candy canes and elves and winter festivals and "happy holidays."

"Keep Christ in Christmas" from the mouths of Christians can sound like, "Remember, we're the most important!"

I've been thinking about this slogan in light of our passages this morning. What would it look like if Christians really were determined to keep Christ in Christmas?

What would our message sound like or look like if we took texts like Isaiah 61 and Mary's song seriously?

Would we be perhaps be less concerned about making sure our message was the most public and prominent each December? Would we be more willing to be ignored and misunderstood? Would we be less inclined to see Christmas as a time to assert the superiority of our religion?

Would we spend more time about actually *being* good news to the poor, the brokenhearted, and the downtrodden than talking about keeping Christmas sufficiently Christian?

Would we be more committed to reading our Bibles standing on our heads? Would we look around in our community at those who are kicked to the curb, those who are ignored, mistreated, misunderstood, those weighed down with damaging assumptions and seek to befriend and offer assistance?

Would we be more eager to be part of the rebuilding, renewing, and restoring work of God in human lives that have been devastated for whatever reason?

My suspicion is that if the Western church was as resolute in living into Isaiah's vision of good news and comfort to the poor and Mary's song celebrating God's great reversal as we often are in trying to manage the cultural message, then ironically people around us might actually begin to take the meaning of this season more seriously.

And even if not—even if the broader culture still marched cheerily on in celebrating Christmas in Christ-less ways—we would be engaged in the much more important task of being faithful to Christ himself.

This is, after all, the point of Christmas, right? Not just to celebrate all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us and for the world in Christ. Not just to give thanks for the staggering truth of God taking on human flesh, important and necessary as these things are.

It is to recognize that we have a part to play in Christ's story. It is to remember that God became like us so that we might begin to *become* like and *love* like God.

The most important part of keeping Christ in Christmas is keeping Christ in *us* and us in him.

We are going to sing It Came Upon a Midnight Clear. As I've said many times, I think that it is during the Advent and Christmas seasons that some of the theologically richest songs of the church come.

As we sing this song, can I encourage us to pay attention to verse 3?

And you beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow

Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing.

If these words describe your present experience in life, I hope you that the coming of Christ will be good news to you this Christmas season. I hope that Christ will come to rest beside you on the weary road.

If they don't, can I encourage you to read your bible standing on your head this Christmas? Can I encourage you to keep your eyes and ears and hearts and minds and hands and feet open to those for whom life is a crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who are toiling slowly and painfully through life?

If we do this, then we will truly have kept Christ in Christmas.

Amen.

