



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The Reason for the Season

LUKE 1:39-55



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Have any of you ever been to Niagara Falls? The falls themselves are always impressive – I’ve been there a couple of times and, sunshine or foggy, rainy day, they are always worth a moments’ contemplation. But there’s also this collection of amusement park-type attractions clustered around. Some of them are your standard, ordinary rides and arcades and vendors of junk food; but the one I’m thinking of is the upside-down house. I’ve walked past it, but didn’t go in. It is...a house that was built upside-down: the ridge of the roof is on the pavement, and the underside of the floor of the house faces the sky. The pictures and reviews of people who have visited are hilarious and surreal: all the furniture is still on the floor, but the floor is, of course, above your head and you’re walking on the ceiling. Most peoples’ experience seems to be that, after a brief period of disorientation and bewilderment, they move to turning their cameras upside-down and taking funny pictures of themselves dangling off the “ceiling.”

Can you imagine trying to live in a house like that? Climbing up to bed every night, pushing up against the lid on boiling pot on the stove?

All the expected rooms and furnishings of a house would be there, but nothing would be quite where it was supposed to be...bewilderment and unwanted surprises would await anyone who entered into a real upside-down house and tried to live there!

The world that Mary describes is a lot like that an upside-down house: all the expected pieces are there – the powerful and the poor, the rich and the hungry, the proud and the lowly – but none of them are quite where we expect them to be.

Mary’s proclamation unfolds the meaning of Jesus’ coming in an unusual way, and she does it by introducing a major theme of the gospel: the idea that salvation comes through reversal – an upside-downing – of the world and every person and everything in it.

The first reversal we see is that of Mary herself. Mary is a young unwed girl in an ancient society that did not recognise young women – any women – as having the capacity for self-determination, or any decision-making authority for her own life and future.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, in response to the angel's words about how she will become pregnant with God's own son, Mary expresses her own sense of humility by referring to herself as the Lord's servant. But even before she agreed to participate in God's saving plan, already God called her blessed. The reversal of her circumstances had begun, as Mary swiftly was changed from ordinary, humble girl to a prophetic speaker – a proclaimer of the good news of salvation. She also became the mother of the Son of God or, as the Eastern Orthodox church more poetically puts it, the God-bearer: one who carried and bore God in Christ, in her own body.

In Mary's proclamation, though, salvation shifts very rapidly from being about individuals – like Mary – to a much larger scale of cultures and social systems.

This broader focus may be a little unexpected for us. We tend to think about salvation these days in terms of individual people; being saved by Jesus is an urge we experience within ourselves, or a turning point we move through as individuals. We ask if someone has been saved, or has accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour, and we wonder if and hope that we ourselves are saved.

But Mary's words do not allow us to stop there, with a personal Jesus and a personal salvation.

Our second reversal, then, after Mary's own, is a reversal of the great forces at work in our cultures and societies, of our expectations of how human beings fit together and live alongside one another.

This second reversal is the heart of Mary's proclamation, her Magnificat. So let's take a closer look at what she said and how she said. One of our tricks from Bible study for engaging familiar Scripture in a new way is to look at the verbs. Aside from the first two – magnify and rejoice, which are Mary's verbs – the rest of the active verbs are all God's, and there are a lot of them.

So this is a proclamation about what God has done. God has looked with favour, has done great things, has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful, has lifted up the lowly, has filled the hungry, has sent the rich away empty, and has helped Israel. Four of those active God-verbs are powerful verbs of direct reversal of what is, swapping the powerful and the lowly, and the rich and the hungry, as complete of an upside-down switch as walking on the ceiling and looking up at the floor in an upside-down house.

It's a lot like what John the Baptist will proclaim, years from this moment in Scripture, but two weeks ago for us: mountains made low, valleys made level, the crooked made straight. Transformation and change that is so complete that things as they existed will be entirely swapped around, upside-down: salvation by reversal.

Now I advise you all to brace yourselves, because we are going to talk time again, and yet another way that Advent as a season and as an event really messes with our sense of time.

If you remember, four weeks ago, we began our Advent journey this year at the end, and at a beginning, with Jesus talking about his second Advent as the end of things as they are and the beginning of a new heaven and earth at the end of the Gospel of Luke. From there we moved back in time to John the Baptist and his prophetic word from God, received in the wilderness, about radical change and how we can live like changed people of God right now.

And now we are back even further, close to the very beginning of Jesus' earthly story. Jesus is only just conceived – currently a foetus – and yet all of God's verbs, as proclaimed by Mary, are past tense. All those verbs, even the extraordinary verbs of reversal, are what God has done.

Actually, it's even more past tense than that – in the original language of the Bible, it's a full-blown, done-and-dusted, God did it, and it's over and done with. Action completed, even before Jesus is born.

While Mary speaks of God's present and future actions through Jesus in the past tense, the angel Gabriel, who brought the news, or rather the offer, of becoming the mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth, too, both speak in the future tense about what God will do through Jesus. It's an interesting juxtaposition, of future hope and present certainty.

I can't help but wonder if Mary had not stepped into God's sense of timing, of seasons and cycles and opportune kairos moments, as she made her prophetic proclamation of what was already accomplished in a baby not yet born.

Mary's proclamation is a paradoxical prophecy that echoes the paradox of our faith, the already – not yet of God's saving work. She speaks of a future God will bring into being through the yet-to-be-born messiah as though it were already done, and yet she knew that, in a human sense of time, it was not. Her son, Jesus, would speak of the kingdom of God in similar ways: near and coming and here, all at once. We do it, too: we worship and act and speak as though already, the kingdom and reign of God have arrived, but when we look around at the world, we pray and hope that God's reign may yet come.

That is where we began this Advent season – with hope for the coming of Christ yet again, even as we began our re-enactment of the waiting of God's people for his birth, knowing that it was already done.

It is fitting that, as our Advent draws to a close this year, we find ourselves hearing Mary speak of salvation as something that is accomplished already, at the moment when we await the Messiah's certain coming. This paradox is the strange, almost contradictory, idea at the centre of Advent. Already, Christ came – was born, preached, healed, opposed the powers-that-be, died, rose and ascended – and yet we begin the Christian year, year after year, waiting, preparing and hoping for him to come.

This is the mystery at the heart of our faith.

At some point, or in some moment between us and God, we will reach a chasm that logic and reason and orderly, sensible human inventions, like the regular ticking of a clock, cannot help us get over. The already – not yet of Advent, of Mary's proclamation, of God's kingdom – it doesn't have to make sense to us to be absolutely true. We can trust the God behind the mystery, because we can know that God, even if we can't fully understand him.

A favourite author of mine wrote beautifully about the mysteries of our faith. He described these mysteries as being like an opaque cloud between us and God, one that we can't see through or brush aside. But what we can do, is fling our love for God up at that cloud, into the heart of the mystery, and know that it is returned to us, a thousand-fold; and never more powerfully and profoundly than in the saving work that God in Christ did, and is doing, and will do.

I've got one last reversal for you, although this one isn't from Mary. Have you ever heard the saying, "Jesus is the reason for the season?"

It's become the rallying cry for Christians everywhere as we push back against the increasing commercialization of Christmas, as we try to keep hold of it as something with deep meaning for our faith, not as a cultural celebration. I think it's probably done some good on that front, and I hate to be a downer – well, no, I don't – but as catchy as "Jesus is the reason for the season" is, he actually isn't.

Jesus is not the reason for the season, the reason that Advent and Christmas happen: you are. You are the reason for the season, for all of this, for millennia.

We are the reason Jesus came and will come. Christ came to enact a reversal in each of us, to save each one of us who would let him. But Mary, remember, told us that there is even more to be saved than you and I. Our flawed, human-built systems of culture, economics, justice and politics – they're the reason for the season, too.

Salvation by reversal means over-turning all the old, familiar pieces of our world – the powerful and the poor, the rich and the hungry, the proud and the lowly – and situating them anew, where they ought to be, in the new society – the kingdom – that Christ has already and not yet made a reality. It'll be as familiar and as bewildering as trying to live in a house with the bed on the floor above our heads as we walk on the ceiling.

But I think an important point to remember when we think about the radical change, the reversal of our expectations of how human beings fit together and live alongside one another: Christ came, not to make things upside-down – but to put them right-side up.

You see, right now, we're living in that upside-down house. We've never known anything different, so it seems perfectly normal to us. Part of being a faithful Christian is seeing through God's eyes just enough that we can come to the realization that things are not right as they are, whether in the world or in us, in our hearts and minds.

That's part of how the reign of God is already here: helping us to see that things are yet upside-down, and helping us to act, as though the world is already right-side up. If you find yourself looking at the world this Christmas and feeling bewildered by the heart-breaking, frightening things you read in the news or experience in your own life...well, that's because the world is upside-down right now, and you've come to know it.

And if you find yourself uplifted by generosity, by warm and loving relationships with friends and family, by beauty, by the presence of Jesus... that's the kingdom of God, coming into the world.

So as we draw near to the moment when celebrate Christ's first advent, remember: we are the reason for the season.

Jesus came and comes and is coming to save you and me, and he's not stopping there – the whole world and everything in it needs saving, and Jesus is doing it: our upside-down house is gradually being tilted back onto its proper foundation. And someday soon, we will all join Mary in magnifying the Lord and rejoicing, because all things will at last be made right in Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.