

Text: Luke 1: 46-56
Title: Flipped Over
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At the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. there's a copy of a Bible that was published by British missionaries in the early 1800s to convert and educate slaves. It was intended for use among enslaved Africans in the British West Indies. Think: Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, etc.

What's unique about this Bible is what's missing. The missionaries cut out any verses or stories that might engender hope or spark imagination and in turn lead to rebellion. So, for example, they cut out passages like, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And they left in passages like, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." They removed the story of the Israelites' captivity in Egypt and their exodus to the promised land. And they cut out the story of the angel's visitation of Mary and the song that Mary sings. They cut out this morning's text....

A Bible without Mary and the *Magnificat*? Seriously?
What's so threatening about the birth of baby Jesus?
What's threatening about two women sharing their pregnancies?
What's threatening about a song?
What's so threatening about Christmas?

Let's come at it this way....

The Bible is full of archetypal stories ~ stories that follow familiar forms and unfold in predictable patterns. For example: if someone goes up a mountain or into the wilderness, chances are there they will encounter God. If they go out on the water, chances are there will be a storm. If a man and a woman meet at a well, chances are there will be a revelatory exchange. And, if an angel visits a woman, chances are there will be a baby.

So, in many ways the story of Mary follows type.

An angel appears to a woman to announce the coming of a baby ~ think Sarah. But, then the story runs a bit off track. For, this is not the story of a long barrenness and a miraculous birth. This is not about fumbling and failed human efforts, or despair before answered prayer; this is the in-breaking of God....

From out of the blue,
with no warning,
with no screening process or qualification,
with no checking schedules,
with no preconditions,
God breaks in.

Now. A Reformed reading of scripture emphasizes that God seeks after humanity, not the other way around. The initiative is God's. The activity is God's. The movement is God's. According to scripture the gap between God and creation is porous, permeable, and from the first scenes in the Garden of Eden to the last chapters of Revelation, where God makes his dwelling with people, God continually breaks in.

God breaks in to Noah,
God breaks in to Abraham,
God breaks in to Moses,
God breaks in to Isaiah,
God breaks in to Zechariah,
God breaks in to a poor-powerless-peasant girl living under the thumb of the Roman empire...

You get the idea. Again and again and again God interrupts and intervenes in an effort to steer creation back to *shalom* ~ back to God's intention. God pursues a people that they might embody God's way and will in this world.

A few years ago, while canoeing in the Boundary Waters, that vast stretch of wilderness between northern Minnesota and Canada, I saw the destruction produced by a storm with straight line winds in excess of 80 miles an hour. Massive trees were toppled over and others were sheared off ~ as if a cosmic barber was doing a trimming.

The root systems on some of the knocked over trees were surprisingly shallow, while the roots ran wide they didn't run deep. I thought that the height and breadth of a tree was matched by a similar rooting; I was wrong. There were substantial trees with skimpy root systems. Those were the ones blown over. There were other trees with roots that sank deep into the soil and rock, and while those trees were battered, they stood tall in the storm.

The roots system of this morning's text runs deep into the soil and rock of God's activity in the Old Testament. To read the Christmas story to the neglect of what precedes it is to miss out on the continuity of God's long pursuit of *shalom*. And you run the risk of shallow roots that gets blown over in a storm. To think Mary stands alone is to miss out on the long line of men and women who responded humanly and faithfully to God's in-breaking.

We tend to see Mary through stained glass ~ she's framed as the embodiment of purity and piety. Catholic tradition even has it that she remained a virgin and that her body was assumed to heaven. Nothing would soil the womb that bore Jesus....

But, as Mary is rooted in this longer story then she is as flawed and conflicted and fallen as anyone of us. She is every bit of us ~ fully human, fully broken ~ when an angel breaks in on God's behalf.

The angel announces that Mary will give birth to a son who will be heir to the throne of David and part of the family line promised to Abraham. He will be the continuation of God's way in this world. He will be Israel.

Mary asks, like any of us would, “How will this happen?” The angel’s response is that the power of God will “overshadow” her. “Overshadowed” is the same word used when God speaks out of a cloud to Peter, James and John on the mountain of transfiguration. “This is my son.” The angel answers Mary that this will be a divine in-breaking; without some other intermediary God will “overshadow” you.

Mary acquiesces with a beautiful line of openness and trust. And then after visiting Elizabeth, and pondering all of this in her heart, Mary sings.

Of course, there is significant scholarly disagreement about the origin of “Mary’s Song.” It has deep roots, following the pattern of other prayers and psalms. It’s very similar to the song of Hannah in I Samuel. Some think that the song was added later because a pregnant girl, from the wrong side of the tracks, couldn’t have penned such an exquisite song. But, it seems to me that if the Spirit can impregnate a virgin, writing a good song is no big shakes.

I like the idea of Mary quilting together lines and lyrics from her faith heritage.
I like that she would pick up the rich tradition of songs celebrating God’s liberating intervention.
I like the idea of a rootsy-remix on the lips of a peasant girl.

Because when Mary rubs her belly and tilts her head back to sing she doesn’t sing a dainty-ditty about the joy within her womb. Mary sings about the tables being turned. Mary taps into the hopes of a people living under Roman rule and sings of a reversal. She starts from the impoverished center of a slave-child’s heart, glories in God’s saving activity, and sings of the reach of God’s mercy.

The powerful proud have lost their grip.
The rich rulers have been ousted.
The present order of things is flipped over like a turtle on its shell.

It’s not a call to rebellion.

The song doesn’t invite the listener to grab a pitch fork and take to the streets. It’s not a challenge for the poor to rise up and get their share. The revolutionary song that Mary raises does not demand human initiative or celebrate human involvement, but it proclaims God’s activity.

God is the actor.
God is the revolutionary.

And, it is worth noting that the verbs in the song are all past tense. They celebrate something that has already happened. That’s an odd turn for a song sung in gestation. But, as Mary sings in response to Elizabeth’s boisterous proclamation, maybe the past tense means that what God has done in Mary’s womb is the decisive revolutionary act....

Don’t be afraid. It is a done deal.
God has come to us. God has broken in ~
as a zygote,
as an embryo,
as a fetus,
as a baby.

Tom Long writes of seeing a black and white photograph that hangs on the wall of museum in Dachau.

It is of a mother and her little girl being taken to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. The girl, who is in front of the mother, does not know where she is going. The mother who walks behind, does know but there is nothing she do to stop the tragedy that is about to unfold. In her helplessness, she performs the only act of love left to her. She places her hand over the little girl's eyes so she will not have to see the horror that faces her. When people see the photograph in the museum, they do not move easily or quickly to the next one. You can feel their emotion, almost hear their cries, "O God, don't let this be all there is. Somewhere, somehow, set things right."

Dear friends, the staggering claim of the gospels is that in the birth of Jesus, through the trust and obedience of Mary, God has broken into creation to ultimately set things right. As one theologian puts it, "Conception has set in motion the decisive eschatological work of God."

Clearly it seems like chaos and horror still have the upper hand, and the birth of a baby in Palestine is either a fairy tale or fool's errand. Clearly it seems like tyrants and bullies are still in power. But! But, the promise of the gospel is that God has decisively broken in. God has aligned himself with the poor and weak, with me and you. God has established a foothold for *shalom*, and all manner of things will finally be set aright. And that calls for a song of upheaval.

So, let the song of Mary be sung.

Let it be sung in Syria and along our southern border,
let it be sung in Trump Tower and in the halls of congress,
let it be sung 'round the table in Roseland and in a little church in Oak Forest,
let it be sung wherever it is dark, or broken, or hopeless, or vain,
let it be sung by pregnant teens and those in slavery.
Let it be sung....

*I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened ~ I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

Luke 1:46-56, The Message

Thanks be to God.
Amen.