



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church December 14, 2014

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11, and Luke 1: 46a-55

With a clear eye towards liturgy and storytelling, I am of the belief that we should keep from mentioning Christmas until the last possible moment. Let's enjoy the Advent journey. St Paul's is having an Advent Carol service this morning; and Advent carols make no mention of the Christmas story. It is good to maintain the waiting and explore need and expectation, and then try to get the most out of the unexpectedness of the birth in the midst of political power and the poverty of placing a new born in an animal feeding trough. However, the real world doesn't work like that; Christmas is so anticipated and welcomed and this time of the year so crowded with end-of-year activities and family gatherings that there is just no way to run a perfect Advent and Christmas. And, of course, the other reality is that Christmas is not unexpected; we have all heard the story so many times and the way that we celebrate it and the meanings that we apply make it almost a blend of Advent, Christmas and Easter. There is no way to unscramble this egg and surprise people with an unexpected birth in the midst of faithful waiting. As much as we might like to congratulate Mary for the joy she expresses with Elizabeth, this is joy looked back on and woven into the whole Gospel story.

The young Mary, newly pregnant goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is also miraculously pregnant and in the interchange at their greeting Mary utters this beautiful song of praise to God for all that God has done; the poor are lifted up and the rich and powerful cast down, the proud are scattered and the hungry fed. Considering all that God has done at this point is bring Mary to pregnancy, it seems a bit strange and overly hopeful; surely, as Hannah did at the birth of Samuel, she should be singing praise to God for what God will do, not has done. Scholars consider that what Luke is doing here is putting the words of the mature post-resurrection Mary into the mouth of her younger self. But surely that doesn't explain it all. Even if you put the latest date on the writing of Luke, you are still in the era of the early, persecuted church in the midst of the powerful, brutal Roman Empire. None of the things that Mary is praising God for bringing about through Jesus have come to pass. The poor are not lifted up and the rich and powerful haven't been cast down, nor the proud scattered or the hungry fed. Mary's praise and joy seem to be either overly hopeful or greatly premature. This reading we look at in Advent doesn't even appear to be fulfilled in Christmas, even if we take in the Easter story as well.

And so some consider this to be a spiritual metaphor; in Jesus the poor in spirit are lifted up and the religiously powerful priests are cast down, those proud of their righteousness are scattered and those spiritually hungry are fed. On a day when we celebrate communion, there is truth in all of that; there is spirituality and faith in our practices and belief. However, Luke won't let us get away with that. The Magnificat is earthy and real and present. Mary is not a worshipper in the Temple who happens to be humble and lowly in spirit; she is a poor, unmarried young woman in an occupied territory. When she talks about the powerful, they are on a throne not Pharisees or priests, and when she talks of the hungry, they are not satisfied but filled. This is Luke, whose Beatitudes are for the poor, not the poor in spirit. Luke is not talking of a spiritual revolution only, he is interested in the same message as the prophets of old – justice, mercy and lived faith. It is Luke that places the words of Isaiah that we heard today on the lips of Jesus. Luke's Jesus talks of good news to the oppressed and the year of the Lord's favour after presenting us a Christmas story of a birth in the midst of a census, to give a basis for oppressive taxes, and says that it happened in the days of Caesar Augustus. Luke is presenting a saviour who saves now, here in the real, present world and not in some future heaven. Mary is singing for joy over the dawning of the long promised reign of God.

So we are thrown back to the problem, how is Mary's song one of joy about the actions that God has done to bring equality and justice to the world when any examination of the world will show that we are now, as well as then, a long way from justice and equality? Much as Advent, Christmas and Easter are all scrambled together and time doesn't seem to matter, so we are being presented with god's idea of time in Mary's Magnificat. The reign of God has broken into the world and is real where it is honoured so that Mary can say that God has done, but that reign still needs to flow out to the whole world and will only become universal in the long awaited end. Just as it is Luke who gives us this earthy real passage it is Luke in Acts who gives us the picture of the early church sharing all their property and caring for all the needy and hungry. James tells his readers not to notice the dress or wealth of people coming to worship and Paul tells the people at Corinthians to share food and respect all worshippers when they come together for communion. These are examples of the in-breaking of the reign of God, real salvation for the poor and the slaves and even for the rich who are released from the oppression of wealth.

As I said at the start, there is no way to unscramble this egg of divine storytelling and present a clear fresh progression from Advent to Christmas to grown Jesus to Easter and beyond. But that kind of linear story is not how the Gospel is now. We live in the time between the times; the time of in-breaking but not complete reign of God. It can become real now, as communities open themselves to God and live that reign, and then we can join Mary in proclaiming joyfully all the wonders of new life and new relationships that God has brought in and through Jesus Christ. We talk of the child and the man and the

man and the risen saviour all at once, so let's try to live the whole Gospel at once and open ourselves to the full reign of God.