

## *An Upside-Down Christmas*

Luke 1:26-56

Sunday, December 15, 2024

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A quick survey of Christmas music reveals a definite winter theme: *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*. *Frosty the Snowman*. *In the Bleak Midwinter*. Not long ago, I ran across a Christmas carol from "down under, a New Zealand folk song, where of course *our* winter is *their* summer. I was struck by the different images they used.

The song goes: "Carol our Christmas, an upside-down Christmas; snow is not falling and trees are not bare. Carol the summer, and welcome the Christ Child, warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air. Shepherds and gatherers move over hillsides, finding, not angels, but sheep to be shorn; wise ones make journeys whatever the season, searching for signs of the truth to be born."

Odd, isn't it? We come to Christmas thinking of it as the season that sets everything right. Christmas is the time to come home and be loved. It's a time to eat comfort food – meatballs and mashed potatoes, cookies and bread pudding, and if you're a really brave Norwegian, a plate full of lutefisk. Christmas is a time for memories, looking back to a day when all was warm and bright, when everything that was upside down in our lives was set right side up, at least for a week or two in December.

Yet, in the Bible Christmas is anything but this right side up, soft and cuddly, world. When the angel Gabriel shows up unannounced on Mary's doorstep, lots of upside-down things start happening immediately. The story isn't about a mom in a nuclear family caring for a conventional child. It's about an unwed, teenage mother, expectant in a most unconventional way. The announcement comes not through official channels of prophets and priests; it's delivered in a whisper by angels. The good news of the birth is sung not to rulers and kings; it comes first to a band of scraggly shepherds who are working the night shift. And of course, the baby is placed not in a cradle loving carved by an adoring grandfather, but in a rough-hewn cattle trough. Perhaps we've gotten so used to this story that we can't quite imagine how messy and cold and smelly and scary it must have been.

Most likely, when Mary gets the news from the angel, her stomach does a flip. Then she starts singing a song. Today we call it the Magnificat, but it's a little

like that upside-down carol from New Zealand: *My soul magnifies the Lord, Mary sings, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

What's going on? God is choosing a teenager, and one engaged to a carpenter, to have a very special baby. Who's going to believe it? *From now on all generations will call me blessed*, she sings. Is Mary being just a little self-centered? Maybe, she is a teenager, after all, and has spent the last few days numb with fear. Now, out from under that fear, she's as excited as if she's been named queen for a day. *The Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.*

This is where the song takes a definite twist. Indeed, *the Mighty One has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty.* Mary sings of a world that's all topsy turvy. Bashar al-Assad comes crashing down in Syria, the prisons have been emptied, the homeless are suddenly housed in the Hilton.

What's going on? I'll tell you: God is breaking into the world. And when God breaks in, God goes about making right everything that's been wrong. "My ways are not your ways," God says, "Behold, I'm doing a new thing."

To begin this new work, a baby is born. Oh, this baby, like all babies, is going to change things for mom and dad. No doubt about that. It's hard enough to run to the grocery store with a little one to bundle up. But it's more than that. This baby is going to disrupt the lives of lots of folks. Comfortable routines are not going to stay the same.

I distinctly remember one Christmas when I was in fifth or sixth grade. My mom decided that she was tired of all the commercialism of Christmas. She wanted to give us gifts that were religious. So, instead of a ping pong set or a new basketball, I got a picture of Jesus. He was standing in a boat, looking over the shoulder of a young man doing the steering. It's called, "Jesus Savior Pilot Me." When I opened the present, I remember being disappointed. I tried not to show it, but I wasn't very grateful. Looking back, I know that my mom had been diagnosed with cancer not long before, but we didn't know it at the time. I imagine those gifts were her way of turning the world's values upside down and trying her best – while she still had time – to pass on her values to us.

Do you see what I'm getting at? I'm asking you to think of Christmas as a time when God begins turning things upside down. And consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, that's why you're a follower of Jesus today – because your world, right side up, is not all it should be. And consider the risk you take by coming before the baby of Bethlehem. Consider the risk of having your comfortable little world changed.

You know what I mean: suppose you're being asked to love someone who's not very lovable; being asked to forgive a wrong even though you'd really rather stay mad; being prodded to be truthful, even though it's so convenient to lie; to be more generous, even though you worry about having enough for yourself; to serve more often, even though you're already busy. Our Bible is chock full of stories of plain, ordinary folks like you and me who've had their world turned upside down when coming face to face with the living God.

Campus Pastor William Willimon tells the story of a couple of college kids – a young man and woman – who had their world turned upside down. They had met during their sophomore year. It was at an information meeting for a mission trip to Honduras in the spring. The college had been sending three mission teams to this poor country for years. Few students who went down to Honduras did not come back changed.

“The young man was very excited,” writes Willimon. “Things were going great for him and his new friend. They were planning on going to Honduras *together*. Who knew where this might lead?”

Then one day, Willimon saw the young man walking dejectedly across campus. He asked what was wrong. The young man said gloomily, “Marianne isn't going to Honduras.”

“Why not?” pressed Willimon. The young man explained, “Well, she told me that her older sister had gone on that trip a few years before and *it changed her*. Her mom and dad were furious. It turned her values all around and made her into a different person. Her parents were not about to let that happen to another of their daughters.”

“Oh come, let us adore him,” we sing at Christmas, “Christ the Lord.” Do we really mean it? We come to Bethlehem expecting to meet the tried and true. We embrace warm, heartfelt traditions that we've known for years. We look for

the assurance of all that we hold dear. Behold, let us adore this cute and cuddly baby. What harm could there possibly be in a baby?

But I, who preach the Bible for a living, am here with a warning: Take care as you gaze into the manger. Beware of coming too close to this Savior. For there's a risk – a wild, unpredictable risk – in coming to him. Why, he might ask something of you that you really aren't expecting. He might have a mind to turn your world upside down. You see, like Mary of old, when we allow God to be born in us, there is no telling, no telling at all, what might happen next. Amen.