

Date: 21 December 2003

SUNDAY: Advent 4

SERMON: The Reversals of Grace

Text(s): Micah 5:2-5; Luke 1:39-56

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On Christmas Eve, 1944, a Dutch cabinet minister, two Norwegian shipping captains, a British major from the Indian army, a Yugoslavian diplomat, a Macedonian journalist, and a German married couple joined one another for a Christmas service with Holy Communion. They came from various Reformed denominations, as well as from Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox backgrounds, and the service was led by a German Lutheran pastor. They all spoke tolerably good German, so that was the language in which they joyously sang the old familiar Christmas carols, and in which the pastor preached a sermon that was full of hope and which emphasized the tidings of great joy which the Christmas message represented.

Apart from the diversity of nationalities, you might not see much that is out of the ordinary in that scene. It is a scene that one could experience almost anywhere on Christmas eve. However, this small gathering of Christians who came to sing the old carols and have their hearts gladdened once again by the old familiar story of the birth of a child in a manger took place in a tiny cell in the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. Martin Niemöller, one of the heroes of the so-called "Confessing Church" which opposed Hitler, was the pastor, and he says that if one were to look at that cell today, one could hardly believe that nine people could even squeeze into it, let alone celebrate a worship service and the Lord's Supper.

Through their years of imprisonment, he and the other political prisoners were not allowed to see or have contact with one another, but shortly before Christmas, 1944, permission was suddenly granted for them to meet once a month and on holidays for worship. They met a total of six times before the end of the war, the last being at Easter in 1945. In his introduction to the small volume of six sermons which he preached on

those occasions, which were published in July of that same year, Niemöller writes, "Today, I publish the sermons preached at that time; first of all, in order to salute thus my fellow prisoners of the last days at Dachau, but also to show clearly that, amidst the horrors of the those days, the Gospel remained alive for us as the power of God. It remains even now our only hope."

Inspiring thought. . . but is it true? One could just as easily see Niemöller and his fellow prisoners as a group of desperate people in a hopeless situation, grasping at familiar religious straws in order to fortify themselves against the disasters they had already suffered and might yet suffer.

Our Old Testament lesson could be viewed in the same light. This oracle in the Book of Micah, which appears to have been written during or shortly after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, when Nebuchadnezzar had sacked the city, destroyed the Temple, and led all the political and religious leaders into exile, nevertheless, proclaimed the dawning of a new day, a day of great reversals. In these reversals the little village of Bethlehem, one of the least significant cities of Judah, would play a key role. Out of Bethlehem, the prophet said, will arise the *one "who is to be ruler in Israel, whose lineage is from ancient days."* Bethlehem, of course, was the city of David, remembered as the ideal king who brought Israel to its height of power; now the prophet hailed the dawning of a new David who would deliver God's people from their enemies and establish justice and righteousness in the land. From Bethlehem, a "nowhere town," true greatness would arise; the rule of justice would spring up. This would not be due to any special qualities of Bethlehem itself; rather it would be the result of the power of God, a God who takes nowhere towns like Bethlehem and a nobody people like defeated and dispersed Israel and makes them into somewhere and somebody.

Sounds great, but it never happened. Not in the prophet's lifetime, nor in the generations that followed him. No righteous king arose from Bethlehem, and no utopian era of justice and

peace arrived. The world with its injustices, with its disparities between rich and poor, with the usual pattern of strong nations conquering weaker ones, continued as it was. Who could blame anyone reading that old prophecy for thinking that Micah was just another “whistler in the dark” using religion as an opiate to ease peoples’ pain and to manufacture hope where there was none.

This same promise of an radical reversal brought about by divine power characterizes the lovely and familiar song of Mary in Luke’s gospel, the song we call by its first words in Latin, the *Magnificat*, which has been passed down through the ages of the church’s liturgy and has been the inspiration of some of the best music by the greatest composers.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts;

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

It’s a beautiful song. What a powerful vision it offers. It’s also naïve and completely unrealistic, isn’t it? Is this the way the world really works? If you’ve been following the excellent journalism series on rural poverty in Maine in the *Portland Press Herald*, this past week, it hardly appears that the hungry are being filled with good things. The sadness of the stories of children in Washington and Aroostook counties is almost unbearable.

And as for the rich being sent empty away, well, I suppose there were some who went bust when the stock market did a couple of years ago, but most probably survived pretty well. I remember a few years ago when it was announced that the average—the average, mind you!—year-end bonus being paid to investment brokers was \$1.5 million dollars with some particularly high-flyers getting bonuses of as much as 27 million dollars? And those bonuses were not spent on food for the hungry, but on luxury cars and luxury houses and luxury jewelry.

Public health officials estimate that more than 1 in 10 people on the continent of Africa will die of AIDS within the next few years unless a vaccine or cure is found. One tenth of the population of a continent! When the Habitat for Humanity team at the American Church in Paris came back from a build in Capetown last year, they reported that virtually every pastor of every church in Capetown was conducting at least three funerals every weekend.

When I believe what is in front of my eyes, I am never amazed that there are people in the world who deny God’s existence or at least God’s goodness, and want nothing to do with religion. I’m only amazed that there aren’t more of them. After all, if we believe our eyes and ears, which most of us do instinctively, it’s hard to find much evidence for any power at work in this world other than greedy self-interest. It’s a “dog-eat-dog” world out there, and if you’re not fast enough or or rich enough or powerful enough, you’re going to be someone’s lunch.

Then what promise do these texts hold out that can explain their tenacious hold on the imaginations of people for centuries—at least twenty-eight centuries in the case of Micah, and twenty in the case of the *Magnificat*? Why have these texts played such a key role in the Christian story? The early Christians began claiming this oracle of Micah as their own after the disaster of Jesus’ execution by the Romans, a time when for his followers, there would seem to have been little horizon for hope. Just one more messianic pretender ruthlessly snuffed out by efficient imperial power, and the hopes they had placed in him dashed. One would hardly expect those disillusioned men and women to begin searching out texts like Micah’s or singing songs like the *Magnificat*, and building them into a new story unless they had some more potent reason than the bravery of people who decide to face the hopelessness of their situation stoically or put a brave face on the disaster that overtook them.

That reason was that they became convinced that Jesus was alive. The encounters

they claim to have had with Jesus after his crucifixion, mysterious as they were, forced them to rethink the power that was at work in him, and therefore, at work in the world and in them. And then they could read back into his birth and into his life a meaning that testified to that power of divine grace, that death-shattering power of God to bring a new creation into being from the ruins of the old. With new eyes, they now read Micah's prophecy of little Bethlehem from which would come one destined for the stars. With new voices they sang the song of the mighty being cast down from their thrones and the rich being sent empty away, and they consistently sang of these dramatic reversals in the past tense: "God *has* scattered the proud. . . he *has* lifted up the lowly. . . he *has* satisfied the hungry. . . he *has* sent the rich away empty." It was their conviction, borne of faith, that God had given Jesus a future beyond the catastrophe of the cross, that enabled them to sing such a subversive song. They literally sang a new world into being.

But how does one get to that point beyond hopelessness where one can sing this song? How does one apprehend that what one sees of the world's sorrows in front of one's eyes is not the ultimate truth of the matter?

The key to such apprehension, to seeing and hearing these reversals of grace, is in Elizabeth's words to Mary at their meeting, "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*" It takes faith to see beyond the obvious. It is faith that can speak of what is hoped for in the past tense. It is faith that transforms a dream of a brighter future into an accomplished fact. It's not that the singer is blind or deaf to what's really happening in the world. It's simply that one who sings this song sees with different eyes and hears with different ears a melody that is often missed, a sustained sub-harmony of grace that cannot be heard without careful and focused attention.

There is no way, really, to explain this or persuade a sceptic with unassailable logic. Faith may be rational, but it is not logical. It flies in the

face of logic. Faith is a response to something that comes from outside us and our closed world of causes and effects. "*Faith comes by hearing,*" says St. Paul, "*and hearing by the word of God.*" To have faith is to take a risk, a gamble. One believes, and then one comes to understand that what Mary sang about is, in fact, the ultimate truth about us and about our world and about God. In fact, there is a strong case to be made that all true knowledge is the product of faith. If a scientist had no faith, there would be no scientific breakthroughs or discoveries. One believes first, and then in acting on that belief, one comes to know.

In fact, when we look at the world through the lenses of faith in God's power to bring down the mighty and lift up the lowly, we begin to see glimpses of how it might be so that the power of love, of justice, of compassion and reconciliation are the real powers that drive human history. Martin Niemöller and his fellow prisoners who gathered in that prison cell in Dachau outlived Hitler and his thousand-year Reich. We've had a rather good example of the mighty being cast down from their thrones in Iraq this past week, when Saddam Hussein, who built empty palaces while starving and murdering his own people, was captured cowering in an eight-foot deep spider hole. Quite a comedown for the self-anointed heir of Nebuchadnezzar. While the world rejoices in his downfall, we need to beware, however, of identifying America's cause with God's, and take care that we do not, in our pride, become the next mighty power to be cast down. I suspect our motives for removing Saddam are only, at best, partially in line with those of God. The God of justice may use what instruments are available, but the instruments themselves must remember that they too, are in the hands of the same God, whose hatred of arrogance and demand for compassion and justice apply to all.

After the fall of the apartheid government in South Africa, Archbishop Tutu engineered a series of public Truth and Reconciliation hearings. One of the main purposes of those hearings was

his conviction and that of other Christian leaders, that unless there were public truth-telling and confession, there could be no reconciliation between the architects of the policies of apartheid and its victims. Strange notion, but then Christians are a bit strange about such things. Anyway, after the confidential testimony one day by some members of the secret police units which had waged a terror campaign against suspected dissidents, describing the torture and murder of one young man, the murdered man's mother came to the president of the tribunal and demanded to know the name of the persons who had killed her son. The president, thinking that she had revenge on her mind, began to upbraid her for asking for confidential information, and reminding her that these hearings were about forgiveness and not about revenge.

The woman replied in a somewhat bewildered voice, "Yes, of course, and that's why I want to know the names of those who killed my son. I want to know whom I have to forgive."

It is only someone who lives in hope rather than despair who can forgive the murderers of her child. It is only someone who knows in her bones that love is a stronger force than vengeance who can transcend her own pain and clear a space where a new creation can begin to take root. That South African mother, like Mary, can sing of the reversals of grace in the past tense. For her, the vision of the future where forgiveness displaces vengeance has already become a present reality.

And if we can take the risk of believing the word of God, as that mother did, and as Mary did, we will discover that there are, in fact, signs of that deeper truth, that ultimate reality, all around us, and that only now do we have the eyes to see them or the ears to hear the undertones of grace.

So perhaps, just perhaps, Martin Niemöller was not simply whistling in the dark, when he and his fellow prisoners sang the old carols and told again the old story of angels announcing tidings of great joy, and of the birth of a child in a manger.

In those terror-filled days in Dachau, the Gospel of God's redeeming grace was alive and powerful for him and for his fellow-prisoners. And perhaps, just perhaps he is right when he says that it remains even now, the world's best and only hope.