

STIR IT UP!
LUKE 1:46-56
22 NOVEMBER 2020
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

Our text today comes from Luke’s Gospel, chapter 1, verses 46-56. It’s usually reserved for Advent, but felt prescient this Christ the King Sunday. Mary, having heard the news of her pregnancy, has gone to stay wither her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth, the elder cousin, herself pregnant with John the Baptist, blesses Mary, calling her the “mother of my Lord,” the first confession of Jesus’ lordship in Luke’s Gospel. Hear now the Word of God in Mary’s poetic response:

46 And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’
56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It’s not just that Costco skips over Thanksgiving, they rush past Halloween too. By early October the store is full of towering Christmas trees, blinking reindeer, and 2000 piece ornament sets. I used to scoff at the gaudiness of the displays, the rush to Christmas, but this year I found it all rather charming.

Charming enough, as it were, that I’ve already started decorating. Usually I’m a grinch about Christmas. No decorations, no music, no mention of the Lord’s pending arrival and its subsequent merriment until the turkey has had its day. On Thanksgiving morning my family would bundle up and drive to Bishopville or Charleston. On the road down it was all Golden Oldies—strictly “secular.” Only on the drive home did Nat King

Cole find his way to the to the tape deck. And only the next morning would the boxes of ornaments and garland find their way downstairs.

In New Jersey the Christmas timeline was even more stark. Many folks celebrated the 12 days of Christmas, which meant a trip to cut down your tree most often happened on *Christmas dang Eve*, guaranteeing maximum freshness through Epiphany. Everything was set and ready on Christmas Adam — the 23rd — but the tree only arrived on Christmas eve. When I set up my tree on December 1st my neighbors audibly scoffed. The eager Southerner come to ruin the holiday.

It is odd how folks get stirred up about Christmas, what reactions the act of decorating or listening engenders. There is a fine balance, part geographical, part cultural, part the insanity of your particular family, between what might be too early, or too late, or God forbid too long. Folks get riled about Starbucks Christmas cups or the holiday muzak droning in shopping malls; heck, even the word “holiday” might set your on edge.

But this year, this odd year, it seems to me that Christmas might ought to break in a little early. And lucky for us all I’ve found justification in the otherwise baffling, truly upsetting tradition of Christmas pudding.

In the Middle Ages a savory Christmas pudding called “Frumenty” became popular in Britain. Over time the recipe evolved to the sweet pudding of “We Wish You A Merry Christmas” fame. By the Victorian era these “puds,” as they are disturbingly called by our British forefathers, became a Christmas staple — after an initial stir, the plums, dried fruits, egg, breadcrumbs, and beer that comprise the “pud” were left to sit for five weeks ahead of the Christmas feast. The spice intensifying and the alcohol preserving the flavors, eventually trinkets were added to the mix as a sign of good fortune for whomever found them (and, presumably that person’s dentist): a coin for wealth, a wishbone for luck., a thimble for thrift.

Now, it just so happens that on the fifth Sunday before Christmas, the Sunday before Advent begins, the Anglican collect begins with a rousing call to action for weary worshippers. “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people!” That fifth Sunday before Christmas the words echo across Britain from country-church to cathedral. And some centuries ago, as the legend goes, one enterprising cook heard the words that called them to worship that day — Stir up, we beseech thee! — and was reminded to get home and get to stirring, five weeks till Christmas ... a perfect timeline for a perfect pud.

So it is that on the fifth Sunday before Christmas our Anglican compatriots in Britain celebrate Stir-Up Sunday, a Sunday to work toward a future feast, a Sunday for preparation. A Sunday to stir things up.

It’s not Christmas yet, heck it’s not even Advent If we are following the liturgical calendar I am Costco-level early. Still, I think it’s time. Time — *just enough* — to stir

things up, let them stew, whether a pudding, a few clinking ice cubes, or better yet — our very lives, a holy stirring, hearing finally what we have long celebrated.

In the Gospel stories Mary comes into full focus as a bookend in Jesus' earthly life. We see her each Christmas laboring in an outhouse in Bethlehem. Then she goes quiet. Next we see her it's at the foot of the cross, watching her son labor to breathe.

Her finite womb carried the infinite God, she swaddled and held eternity. And in the blink of an eye she found herself weeping as her son, her Lord, struggled under the weight of the Roman Empire, bearing the world on his broken back.

According to the proper ecumenical calendar, the fifth Sunday before Christmas we are to celebrate Christ the King, a relatively new addition to the calendar, instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a response to the rampant nationalism that swept across Europe in the wake of the First World War. Christ the King was meant as an occasion to mark the ultimate Kingship of Jesus Christ, high above the earth, sovereign over its nations, histories, and peoples.

But this fifth Sunday before Christmas I want to stir Christ the King up a bit. I want to celebrate with the Anglicans and bring Christ the King back down to earth. I want to know what Mary teaches us about Jesus' Kingship, to explore how Mary, singing her pastoral hymn in Palestine those millennia ago, challenges us from our pews and pulpits, stirs us up even, and transforms our living. I want to know what it means to worship a cradle-born King, crucified by an empire, risen in flesh, marked by the wounds of his earthly sojourn to reign with us forever.

Stir up your cocktails, stir up your puddings. Make her words your prayer. This Christ the King Sunday let God stir up you will. Christmas is coming, and now is the perfect time to prepare.

From the very beginning of the Gospel, by arriving first among a poor, unwed, nobody, Luke shows us what Jesus' life will mean for world history, for emperors and empires, for us, and then, because it's subtle and we might could miss it, he tells us. Mary's song heard in its fullness — without the haze of nostalgia, the swell of a choir, the pipes of the organ — should shake us a bit.

The fact that Luke has chosen to foreground the voice of a woman is remarkable in itself, and Mary's voice swells as she sings of God's goodness to her — God "has looked with favor on the poverty of his servant." That alone may not stir us up much, but she moves deftly from her particularly circumstances to God's universal action:

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud [...]

⁵² He has brought down the powerful [...],

⁵³ he has [...] sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

Mary’s response to God’s calling is a celebration of who God is and a reminder of God will do. She has seen God in her own life and in the life of poor Israel. She has seen rise and fall — the proud, the privileged, the rich, those with a belly full of turkey, sent home before supper. She feels with each kick in her womb what it means for fortunes to be reserved.

Mary’s song is the quintessential Christmas aria, its poetry speaks a truth beyond words.

People get worked up about the true meaning of Christmas, but y’all, this is it. *This* is what it means to put the *Christ* back in *Christmas*. *This* is what the in-breaking of the Savior does for individuals, whether a Palestinian Jew in the first century or a High and Mighty ’05er. Christmas is not a tree on the 24th or a blinking October display. It is a world turned upside down.

Christmas properly celebrated looks like Mary gazing at an eternal king on a cross; Mary holding the belly which holds the world. Christmas looks like the poor lifted up and the rich brought down. A leveling plain — that is our King, that is our Kingdom.

Is it too early to sing Christmas, or does it simply cut too close? Is there ever really a good time to hear Mary’s stark warning? Mary is what Christmas looks like, she is Christmas *sings* like.

I told you we were gonna stir it up!

Generations ago St. Augustine posed a salient theological question: “What do I love when I love my God?”

What do we love when we profess to love God? What do we love when we gaze at Mary, carrying the fullness of God in her womb? What do we love when Jesus pronounces woes to the rich, the religious, the haughty in the Sermon on the Mount? What do we love when we see him hanging from the bars of a Roman tree? What do we love when the tomb is empty?

Who is the King whom we celebrate today, and what does that mean for our living?

Listen to Mary if you want to know. Mary celebrates a reversal of fortune and we are implicated. She draws a line between those who serve God and those who sit on thrones, occupy board rooms, perch in prestige. For Mary and the lowly like her, God’s arrival means celebration, good fortune. But for the proud and rich it is the exact opposite: a judgment, a scattering, the displacing of earthly power.

There is hope in the magnificat but there is warning too. We live and prosper in a world that rewards power, an economy that exploits labor, and a society that refuses to recognize those most in need. We invest in systems that exacerbate the gap between the haves and have nots and scoff at those not wily enough to find their way. Is this the Kingdom of which Mary sings? Is this the hope of Israel? Is this the witness of our God, cradle born, cross-crucified?

Precisely because we “sing in faith,” wrote Martin Luther, we must take seriously Mary’s song: “The mightier you are, the more you must fear.” Folks, we are a mighty lot. And if we are to take Scripture seriously — all of Scripture, and not just the parts about a heavenly banquet — we have to find a way to sing Mary’s song, to sing it in faith, to sing it with the poor, for the poor, and to allow it to transform our lives. To quote Johnny Cash, we gotta allow God to cut us down a bit.

What do we love when we love our God? Who is the King we serve and celebrate this day? I fear the answer in my own life. I love comfort, affluence, a safety net, and in my living I adore the signifiers of status. But if I truly love God, the cradle-born God who emptied himself of status to take on the flesh of vulnerability, what I love is a slow, simmering shake up. What I love is the Kingdom as it was meant to be — a leveling plain — rather than the world as it is.

Is it too early to sing Mary’s song? Never. It is a call in the aorist tense, the tense of Mary’s song: true yesterday, today, and forever.

“The ‘event of God’ writes Joe Caputo, means “are already on the receiving end of an address, overtaken by the event of a promise [...] We are called by God, which is our vocation, even as we call upon God, which is our invocation. We subsist between the calls.”

Are you ready to sing with Mary, to listen till her song becomes yours?

Or will you hold on to your thrones and privilege until the Good news comes by force and turns the world upside down? Either way, Advent breaks in. At the end of the day the Magnificat is an opportunity for folks like us. God is at work in individuals like Mary. God is at work in us too. But Christmas this year means setting aside other Kings, allowing yourself to be displaced, following the way of the cross.

Stir up our wills.

Stir up our lives.

Stir up the world.

We beseech the, Christ our King, sovereign over the universe,
bearing the wounds of the journey, here in this sanctuary,
in barrios, on the belt-line, in Sacred places, and in the profane.

Stir us up, O God.