

The World Turned Upside Down
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55
December 13, 2020 (Advent)

In 1781, when the British soldiers were leaving Yorktown after General Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington the soldiers were heard chanting a British drinking song with the phrase: “the world turned upside down.” Everyone was stunned that a global superpower could be defeated by the ragtag army from the colonies. It was unthinkable... cataclysmic. The ones who had been on top - in terms of economic power and military might - had been beaten. The world turned upside down!

Both of our scripture readings today paint pictures of a world turned upside down. What once was will be no more.

The prophet’s audience in Isaiah 61 were people who lived both literally and figuratively among the ashes of their former lives. Their homeland lay in ruins, and they grieved not only for a lost past, but also for a lost future. They felt forgotten, destitute, hopeless.

The job of the prophet was to lift up an inspiring vision to these people in these harsh circumstances, to bring good news to their weary hearts, to plant hope.

The picture Isaiah paints here is one of reversal - of the world as they currently know it - turned upside down by their God: captives are released, the blind see, ruined cities are repaired, in place of mourning, gladness; instead of a faint spirit, praise; in place of ashes, a beautiful garland.

This poetry of Isaiah takes me to the summer of 1984, when I drove from PA to spend the summer in Yellowstone. When I got to western Wyoming, I confess I was enchanted by the loveliness of a region so different from what I had known all my life.

Outside of Pinedale, I turned my little Honda Civic onto a road that took off across some range land and led through the wooded foothills. I was in search of a lake I’d seen on the map. When I found it I stopped, and got out of the car to breathe in the beauty: green trees, wildflowers, birds, a house here and there, some rock outcroppings, a sparkling lake, all with the Wind River mountain peaks as a backdrop.

After a while, I left that spot, to go in search of more scenic vistas. I drove on down the road a couple miles, rounded a corner, and was taken aback. All of a sudden I found myself surrounded by a charred, ghostly landscape. The ground was blanketed with ash; not a bit of green in sight, for acres and acres. As I drove on, I felt a sense of isolation and sadness pressing in on me. The dull burned out forest seemed almost haunted.

I turned the car around and high-tailed it back the way I came. What a relief it was to round that one certain corner in the opposite direction, leave the ashes behind and bask in the lush lake landscape again.

It's this kind of contrast, this kind of restoration Isaiah speaks of. This is what God desires for us - this is what God promises.

For us, this year might seem like one of driving through that ashen landscape. Dreams lost, lives lost, and so much has changed. And we can't just turn the car around a drive out of it. Sometimes we have to sit there for a while, or keep on going. And we have to acknowledge the ashes, the losses, until the ashes aren't ashes anymore and new life finds its way into our world. Because this is what God does, this is what desires for us - the lush lake landscape, a garland of flowers instead of the ashes of grief; a rebuilding of the ruins, a reversal for those who are oppressed, the lifting up of the down-trodden.

This is what's promised. In fact this is what God is already doing in our world. This is what we celebrate when we celebrate Christmas, this is what we are made a part of when we say "yes" to Jesus in our lives.

Mary, too, sings of a world turned upside down. Certainly it is the story of her life: a poor young woman, from an out-of-the way place, and God chooses her to help carry out God's plan to become "scandalously particular" among us. But it's more than personal for her, it's global too.

Like Isaiah's poetry, Mary's song projects a remarkable vision of God's activity in the world. One of the most intriguing things about Mary's song is that her references to God's work are all offered in past tense:

*"He has scattered those with
arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed."*

Mary sings of future events as if they've already happened. It seems to me that this demonstrates tremendous faith - to speak of God's future with such assurance, such confidence; to celebrate future as memory.

And the thing is, Christmas makes *us* people with this kind of faith, because Christmas tells us that God's future is already here, with us and among us, and it looks like Jesus. God's future looks like Jesus doing what he does: turning the world upside down, healing, setting free,

bringing life in the midst of death. God's future also looks like you and me - when we do what Jesus does.

I have to admit, this song Mary sings can be disturbing, because, let's face it, it's revolutionary. And maybe we don't want the world turned upside down, really. Because when you are on top, when you've got access to power and resources and privilege, you're reluctant to give those things up.

But I think what's really happening here, what Mary's really singing about, is a great leveling. It's not so much about reversing the hierarchy and putting those who've been on top on the bottom and those who've been on the bottom on top. It's more about doing away with the hierarchy altogether, and instead bringing people eye to eye - rich, poor, lowly, high-powered, all as beloved children of the Living God. It's about creating a circle of justice in which everyone has a place at the table. What God envisions for us and for the world is just and right and healthy relationships between all kinds of people.

When we celebrate Christmas, this is the vision we accept and celebrate and claim. And Jesus invites us to sing and live into Mary's song and Isaiah's vision along with him. So we lift up the voices of peoples long silenced; we listen to the marginalized - the low-wage workers, those fleeing for their lives, those who put themselves at risk for the rest of us. We listen to their hopes and dreams - with respect - and we look for ways to honor them and be in solidarity with them, and we look for practical ways to embody this leveling Mary sings about.

The world turned upside down. This is what Christmas is about: God's transformative power at work in our world. We look at our lives and at our world, and we see God doing God's thing -
 making a place at the table for everyone,
 repairing broken hearts and lives,
 turning ashes of grief into landscapes of joy.

This is what Christmas is about: looking at our lives and our world and living into Isaiah's vision and Mary's song.

Someone who knew this was the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1863 Longfellow was still grieving the death of his wife when he received word that his son, who had been fighting for the Union Army, had been seriously injured. Longfellow went south looking for him, and brought him home. Grieved and worried, Longfellow eventually poured out his heart in poetry that Christmas.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
 Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet The words repeat
 Of peace on earth, good-will to [all]!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to [all]!...

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to [all]!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to [all]!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
 "For hate is strong, And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to [all]!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to [all]!"

May it be so for us, and for the world God loves.