

## **“How To Celebrate the Topsy-Turvy Message of Christmas”**

**Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55**

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Homiletics professor Charles L. Campbell suggests that our familiar reading from Luke, in which Mary and Elizabeth compare notes on their unexpected pregnancies, brings us face to face with the upside-down world inaugurated by the incarnation (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 93). This story is not a routine sacred one, he says, but a topsy-turvy tale filled with joy, amazement, foolishness, and danger. As a result, it is best interpreted not by serious academic commentaries or pious religiosity, but by the folk traditions and street theater of the Feast of Fools, an ancient practice of making a point through farce.

In his book *Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance*, humanities scholar Max Harris describes the practice with these words (p.140).

Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, Christmas was a time for festive reversals of status. As early as the ninth century, a mock patriarch was elected in Constantinople, burlesquing the Eucharist and riding through the city streets on an ass. And as late as Innocents Day (December 28) 1685, in the Franciscan Church of Antibes, lay brothers and servants ‘put on the vestments inside out, held the books upside down,... wore spectacles with round orange peel instead of glasses,... blew the ashes from the censers on each other’s face and hands, and instead of proper liturgy chanted confused and inarticulate gibberish.’

Cross-dressing, masking as animals, wafting foul-smelling incense, and electing burlesque bishops, popes, and patriarchs mocked conventional human pretensions. So did the introduction of an ass into the church in commemoration of the flight into Egypt, and the braying of the priest, choir, and congregation during mass.

You will have noticed, perhaps with gratitude, that we have not chosen to reenact all this today. It seems so irreverent. And yet, how else can we get, really get, the radical nature of the Christmas message — a Holy God taking on human form?

The Feast of Fools for Christians is a bit like Purim for Jewish people. Based on the book of Esther, it is a farcical approach to reenacting the story about an impending genocide averted by bold faith. The point is not to minimize the seriousness of the threat but to express faith in overcoming it by laughing in its face.

In like manner, the point of the Feast of Fools is not to minimize the significance of Jesus' birth but to say that ordinary expressions cannot capture how jolting the good news is. In the words of a hymn we sang last week, the world, the entire world, is about to turn. We don't celebrate this topsy-turvy message with a yawn.

But we find the message in more than one reading today because this is how God has always intervened in this world — in unexpected ways through the least likely people. The reading from Micah says, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth from me one who is to rule in Israel..." The prophet envisions a time after the trauma of foreign oppression when Israel will have a great leader again, but the leader will come from Bethlehem, part of a tiny clan, or what Eugene Peterson paraphrases in *The Message* as "the runt of the litter."

And not only does this new leader come from unimpressive roots; he functions in a way that does not match traditional expectations. Kings are powerful conquerors who don't put up with any pushback or dissent. They succeed by being tougher than anyone else. But this ruler stands and feeds his flock in the strength of the Lord, and the people shall live secure and in peace, for he shall be the one of peace. Peace, not war; nurture, not domination; from the runt of the litter.

We might think of Yoda in "Star Wars." When Luke Skywalker first meets him, he doesn't recognize him. He is so small and fragile that he seems like an irritating distraction. But Yoda is more powerful than Luke can imagine, and the way he uses power is not like Luke

expects. Luke is looking for a great warrior, but Yoda tells him wars are not what make people great.

All this fits Micah's vision of a new leader and it describes many leaders in ancient Israel. Jacob is the younger twin and seemingly not of very high character. Joseph is the second youngest of Jacob's twelve children. Moses is a stutterer... we clearly haven't gotten over that challenge yet. David is the runt of his litter. Rahab is a prostitute, Ruth is an outsider, a Gentile. Yet these are the people God chooses to use and in ways the faithful could never imagine. Upside-down, topsy-turvy... it takes a raucous festival to celebrate this!

We find this message in our reading from Luke too, the Visitation it is called in Christian tradition. God chooses two marginalized women to be not just vehicles of the gospel message but carriers of sacred children who will change the world. In this time, the term "marginalized women" is redundant because all women are marginalized, but these two are even more so. One is too old to have children, the other too young and unwed, yet God chooses them. It is astonishing, crazy, foolish!

Mary even says in her song, "for (God) has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant..." She can't figure out how she got the job, or why, but she did. And as unexpected as her identity is, the ministry she helps make possible is even more unexpected. The proud are scattered in the thoughts of their hearts, the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. The world is about to turn!

So, what are the implications for us? One implication concerns the identity of who God might use today to bring light and hope into our lives and world. We tend to think of well-known people and key leaders, perhaps even clergy types... but the biblical story suggests that we might want to look elsewhere or at least consider other possibilities.

Perhaps it will be the wayward barn animal at the Children's Christmas Story... the who wanders all over the room whether by crawling or walking but always with a smile and wonder, stirring laughter. Perhaps it will be someone we think we are helping through the clothing ministry or white flag or the food truck, someone whose

resilience and insight catch us off-guard and inspire us. Perhaps it will be the last person we expect, a complete stranger.

I heard a story this week on NPR about a wounded Ukrainian soldier who has appeared on the Ukrainian version of the reality show “The Bachelor.” His name is Oleksandr Budko, he is sandy-haired and blue-eyed, muscular, and he walks on two prosthetic legs. He lost his legs in the war two and a half years ago, but since then, he has done excruciating physical therapy and competed in the Invictus Games. He has ridden a motorcycle, gone rock climbing, performed in a ballet, and now is on “The Bachelor” and perhaps fallen in love.

Budko says from the time of his injuries he realized there was no point in being angry at anyone or anything. It was better to do something good instead. He wanted to show others struggling the possibilities in life, to give people faith. He tells other wounded soldiers and civilians, “Do not focus only on your injury, because remember — you are examples of courage and heroism. You are not disabled.”

To say that Budko is inspiring is a massive understatement. He is a light of hope and possibility, an example of profound resilience and faith, a double amputee. Who would have thought?

One implication of our stories is the startling identity of God’s chosen instruments. Another implication concerns the way God works, often in a shocking, subversive manner. This is why the Feast of Fools presents a helpful focus today. We tend to look for God’s activity in the usual places, in conventional religious settings and events, when we are at church, and we certainly hope and pray that God is still at work here!

But God is not restricted to any one place. The God who was in Christ does not wear a tracking device. God is sovereign over all creation and thus engaged in the work of redemption where things matter the most — in the world of business, in the realm of politics, in academic settings, in the theater and symphony and at the ballet. God is at work in housing projects and on Wall Street; among urban, small-town, and rural communities; in red, blue, and purple states; in our nation and in nations some demean harshly.

And everywhere, God is at work for love and justice, to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, to help the hungry and

challenge the privileged. At least, that's what Mary says. It's not a comfortable message for nicely dressed, conventional people. It's jolting, upside-down, topsy-turvy, which means it may be right.

I will never forget a conversation with some good friends in another church I served. We were working on a mission/vision/values statement, and a few folks were upset with the reference to "God's radical forgiveness in Christ." The objection was to the word "radical." They thought of hippies protesting the war in Vietnam, marching for racial justice, and the like. *We don't want to be like them!*

So, I first talked about the meaning of the word "radical" — either the very essence of something or something extreme and transforming. And then, I asked, "How do we think about God's forgiveness of us? Is it ho hum? Is it no big deal because we haven't really done anything too bad? Or is it extreme and transforming, reflecting the very essence of who God is?" There was no more opposition to the term.

God's grace and love are radical. God taking on human form for our benefit is radical, but it is the good news we celebrate this season, and we are glad it is. Let the Feast of Fools begin!