

Sermon Advent 2 Midweek 2021

December 8, 2021

Luke 1: 46-56

In the Name T of Jesus. Amen.

As most of you have probably figured out, I enjoy the Indiana Jones movies. I often will reference Raiders of the Lost Ark when I speak about the Ark of the Covenant from the Old Testament to make the connection when I'm talking about that Ark and not the Ark of Noah. In any case, I remember being nine or ten years old when I saw Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade the first time. If you haven't seen that, in the movie Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones finds himself on an adventure to discover the location of the chalice our Lord used at the Last Supper. I figure I'm not spoiling anything at this point, but he finds it. That said, the discovery of the chalice ends with a requirement to choose which cup the chalice itself is from a number of cups which look as though they could be the possible vessel our Lord used when hosting the Passover meal that night and instituting the Supper we still celebrate today. If you've seen the movie, you might remember there being a small party of characters who see this array of choices. You might also remember that one character chooses poorly and pays the consequences and Indiana chooses wisely and is rewarded with being able to use the cup to heal his father who is dying from a gunshot wound.

However, I bring this up, because something the creators got right was how they portrayed the chalice. I remember as this nine or ten year old child being upset when the first character made his selection because he clearly didn't get it. He looked around at this array of finely ornamented vessels and he picked one that was of the most ornate. I knew right away that wasn't going to be the right choice. Our Lord didn't live in an abundance of means. He was born in a manger. He lived the life of a carpenter. He died the death of a criminal. The vessel for His meal wasn't going to be a bejeweled goblet of noble metal. And I was relieved when Indy chose the cup that looked lowly, austere and unornamented. That was the correct choice.

Of course, I don't bring this up to make an argument for using communion ware which is common looking. As we see the construction of the Temple in the Old Testament and as we see the woman pouring the costly nard on the feet of Jesus, it's clear that the vessels which are associated with the presence of God among us are worthy of great expense. It is good that they reflect the nature of their use. However, like I said the movie's creators got something right: the humility of our Lord.

As we see this lesson tonight, we can make a connection to that as well. This is a connection to a theme we see throughout the Bible, and in fact see especially in the

Gospel of Luke where the Magnificat for this evening comes from, and that's the theme of what we call the Great Reversal.

As we come to this canticle, this “hymn,” that Mary sings, we see her pregnant with the Lord in her womb. She comes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is somewhere around six months pregnant with John the Baptist. And if you know the story—which we'll likely talk more about in a couple of Sundays when we have what's called “The Visitation” for our lesson—then you remember that as Mary approaches Elizabeth and greets her, John leaps in Elizabeth's womb at the presence of the Savior. It's the acknowledgment of this and perhaps the reflection of the miraculous nature of John's and Jesus' conceptions respectively that evokes from Mary this song. And this song is replete with this theme of reversal.

Hear how it comes out: **My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”** Can you hear it there?

In all of these parts there is a switch that happens. First, you have Mary in this lowly estate as the servant of the Lord, as the humble handmaiden of the Most High. And He has looked up on her and blessed her. In fact, I didn't read again, but we see that He blessed her that all generations would call her blessed. And we do: the blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of our Lord. In theology we call her the Theotokos, the Bearer of God. And this reflection is consistent with the other statements: the strength shown with His arm to scatter the proud; the bringing down of the mighty from their thrones; the exaltation of the humble, the filling of the hungry; and the sending away of the rich. Those who are in a high position have a role reversal with those who are in a low position.

So, how do we apply this to ourselves? First of all, I think it's clear that we should seek lowliness. That's hard. The world doesn't value lowliness. As much as we might bristle at arrogance and outright self-importance when it's directed at us, the reality is that there is something about how the world works that these overpower people.

I mentioned a few weeks ago listening to the podcast, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,” which is about the immense growth of a church in Seattle, Washington, called Mars Hill. This church grew with the fame of its pastor, Mark Driscoll, who was known for his bombastic style and charisma. However, in listening to how the church grew, it was clear that a part of its numerical success came from the willingness of people to acquiesce to Driscoll's hubris. To paraphrase one of the oft played quotes in the podcast, finally the

pastor was fired because he was a jerk. And the church fell because of it. And you see this in all manner of places. You see this in churches. As I've watched churches and pastors in places. I've witnessed how churches that have great numerical success often find this growth under the auspices of a pastor who has a large personality. With that personality, however, often comes an ego. Often, there is a willingness to throw people under the proverbial bus. Driscoll himself willingly acknowledged that.

And of course, you see this all the more in the world. Think of people like Steve Jobs, the founder and former CEO of Apple. The understanding was that Steve Jobs had his vision for things and those who disagreed were left in the dust.

Now, to be clear, God can certainly use these things to accomplish good. He's the God who brings great and wonderful things out of the worst of circumstances. So, I don't want it to sound like I'm saying that any organization or church over a certain size is inherently misled or, even worse, evil. I also don't want to make it sound like all of the men who lead these organizations are also inherently horrible people. I only make the point to connect how we as broken people willingly succumb to this mindset and confidence. And in our culture it's that much worse because of how highly we value things like celebrity and being a part of the chic groups.

But hear the warning of our Lord. Hear the warning in particular for your own good. Make yourself lowly. Humble yourself. As Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”** Look to those examples of people willing to sacrifice and suffer. We so often look up to the people who appear successful. We are looking the wrong way when we do that. And we're all apt to it. Instead, look at the lowly. There will be this exchange. The lowly will be the ones finally exalted. The ones who have had it all, they will be the ones brought down. As I mention all of this related to earthly mindsets, what we see is that those who have all this, they will finally be humbled before God.

I think one of the things that's often touted in our culture is the issue with the wealthy elites. Many want to tear down those elites and rip them to shreds because of their greed. And is there greed? Obviously to an extent. After all, how much money does one need? But there will be accountability just like the rich man and Lazarus. Our duty isn't to figure out how to exact that accountability. Instead, it is to make ourselves lowly.

This is because the lowly will be blessed. Just like Mary was blessed in her lowly and humble estate so will we be blessed. And so, we ought to heed that advice of Paul of considering the needs of others. And this can be hard, because it can be easy to focus that on those we know and care about—which isn't to say it's wrong to give to those we know and care about, God puts people in our lives to care for them—but it's to say that it shouldn't be limited to that. Mentioning the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus—you know the story where the Rich Man feasts sumptuously while Lazarus starves at his gate, and both die with Lazarus going to heaven and the Rich Man to hell—who do you think knew Lazarus? Did the Rich Man even know him?

But there is that comfort that the Lord knew him. And in that we hear the comfort of this exchange. The lowly are known by God and He will exalt them. We see in fact that He is the God who works in lowliness.

As we are coming to Christmas that's exactly the joy that we have. There is the Christ child who was born not in a palace but in a manger, who was raised not in soft kingly attire, but with the worn, hardened, hands of a carpenter, who died not in the comfort of a bed with 800 thread count sheets, but in the nakedness of exposure on the cross. And this lowliness shows that comfort that we should cling to.

The reality is that our sin makes us low. It grinds us underfoot by the oppression of sin—both the original guilt we have because of our forefathers and the actual sins we commit—and it grinds under the curse of death—with all the grief pain and suffering that comes with it—and it grinds us under the tyranny of the devil who would that we suffer. But Christ came from the glories of heaven. He gave all of that up for you. He exchanged His position of glory to not only suffer with you but for you. He made Himself lower than Lazarus, most of all on the cross—He humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. And as He did that, thanks be to God, He was also exalted in the resurrection and ascension.

So why is that good? Because you belong to Him. As you humbly acknowledge your sin, as you desperately see the need to rely on His promises, not on your own strength, not even the strength of your own faith, but on His sustaining that faith in Word and Sacrament, then you are united to Him. United by the waters of baptism, united by His body and blood. United to the King who utilized lowly things of the world to exalt you to His heavenly Kingdom. That's what He does. He makes out of nothing, and He makes us nothing that He might exalt and build us up eternally in Him. Amen.