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*The Upside-down World of God*

Luke 1:46b-55; Micah 5:2-5a

One of the problems with our Christmas stories is that we are too familiar with them. We fail to see how incredible, how ridiculous, how reassuring they are. Today's gospel lesson is a case in point: two pregnant women holding the future of God. It wasn't the first time something like that happened, and it wasn't the last...won't be the last, I should say. The Hebrew and Christian Bibles are fraught with examples of illogical and unpredictable circumstances.

In this Christmas story, a pregnant, unmarried Mary journeys north by herself to seek out her cousin Elizabeth. Mary knew of the Elizabeth's pregnancy. When Mary enters the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the priest, the fetus of "John the Baptist-to-be" inside Elizabeth kicks and she is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, knowing that her cousin Mary is pregnant with the One who is to change the world. Elizabeth offers her blessing on Mary; then, Mary sings a song known by the first word in the Latin version of the text, *Magnificat*. It was Mary's blessing to God—"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

One side of the story that stands out is what I mentioned just earlier: the glorious future of Israel and the world resting on two pregnant women who are cousins. This unlikelihood is matched in a seven-hundred-year-old forecast of the prophet Micah. Micah's theme is one both Jews and Christians are familiar with: God uses the most unexpected and ordinary of circumstances for the most extraordinary events. Story after story affirms this predictable unpredictability of God. The story of Elisha sending the commander Naaman who has leprosy to bathe seven times in the dirty waters of the River Jordan to rid himself of the disease. Abraham setting out to who-knows-where to establish a people-of-God more numerous than the stars in the sky. Nearing one hundred years old, Sarah finally conceives with the child who is to continue the bloodline. King David coming from the least likely of the sons of Jesse—the youngest son of Jesse—peasant folk from rural Judah. David, shepherd boy called from the field by his

father to attend to the needs of his brothers fighting the army of Judah against the Philistines, volunteering to fight the Philistine's Goliath, and being victorious for Judah.

In today's Micah's passage, the prophet is predicting that the one coming to save Judah would come from the most unlikely of places—rural Bethlehem, just like David three hundred years earlier—rather than the capital city of Jerusalem.

So, from the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament) and the Christian Bible (New Testament) come absurd and unlikely scenarios. A new leader of Judah will come from unsophisticated, Hicksville Bethlehem. And, two pregnant women hold within their hearts and bodies a new future God has in mind. The response: they each offer blessings to God and the other.

For the past three months, the Wednesday evening adult study group's book has been Barbara Brown Taylor's newest book, *An Altar in the World*. It is an unconventional book and approach to practicing spiritual disciplines. This past week the group met at our home for pizza and the last chapter of the book: "The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings."<sup>1</sup>

Since today's gospel reading contains two pregnant peasant women (one unmarried) blessing each other and the future of their unborn sons, I thought three of her insights regarding the practice of pronouncing blessings would be good for us this morning.

First, Barbara says, "Blessing prayers do not overlook such complexity or the pain and suffering that can accompany it. They simply decline to [judge the circumstances]." In the story Luke offers about the insight of Jesus and John's mothers, they both, with all the difficulties surrounding the pregnancies, choose to bless the event rather than curse it. We have pretty well sanitized the Jesus' birth event. He *was* born to peasant parents. Luke details an unexpected and unplanned pregnancy for an unwed young woman. Her journey alone eighty miles north of Nazareth to the hill country of Galilee would not have been easy. And Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, was getting a bit old to be bearing a child. Zechariah, her priest husband, had become a deaf mute upon the angel of God

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York, HarperCollins: 2009), 193-209.

informing him that his prayers were to be answered by his wife, Elizabeth, becoming pregnant even in her older age.

I would say that the circumstances weren't ideal for either of them. Yet, they both chose not to judge the circumstances but rather to bless each other and God. Many of the circumstances we find ourselves in are beyond our control. A blessing always has more power to transform people and circumstances than a curse. All of life comes from God, so offer a blessing even on those things you don't fully understand with the same spirit Mary had, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then, leave the rest to God.

A second piece of wisdom Taylor offers about pronouncing blessings is this: "the practice requires you to ease up on holding the line between what is bad for you and what is good." When we give up thinking we are smart enough to know the difference between the two, we learn to bless what seems good in our lives as well as that which seems to be the worst we can imagine. The blessings cover our ignorance and open our eyes to all the positive possibilities in even the worst of circumstances.

Barbara told of having a friend who had a reoccurring bad dream, such that he was never able to sleep uninterrupted though the night. The dream was always the same. A monster would show up at his home banging on the door demanding something. The man would look for a weapon in the house, then open the door, and kill the monster. Only, the monster would come back in the next dream even larger. Sometimes pieces of the monster would get on him and become like a raging infection.

One night, in the dream, it occurred to the man that what the monster wanted was for him to bless the monster. That was the only thing that would end the demon's agony and make him go away. So the man, in the dream, with his guts on fire and his hands in front of his face opened the door.

"I bless you," he said to the monster, "now go away." But saying it once was not enough. He had to say it over and over in as many ways as he could think of. It was as if the monster/demon could not get enough of the blessing. It was as if no one had ever blessed him before. Finally, the man (in the dream) said, "I bless you in the name of the Christ, now go in peace." Making a sound like a kitten, the demon turned around and never came back.

What demons, what monsters might you be fighting that need your blessing rather than your curse? What blessing do you need to give yourself in order to live in peace with yourself, your friends, your family, and the world around you?

The last piece of wisdom about offering blessings is that doing so puts you as close to God as you can get, Taylor says. To learn to look with compassion on everything that is...to see past the raging demons on the outside to the aching hearts on the inside...to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be...to surrender the priority of your own agenda out of love for that which belongs to God places you at the very heart of God.

Both Mary and Elizabeth chose to bless the circumstances of their questionable pregnancies and open wide their arms to the wisdom and future of God. Who would have known that out of such humble circumstances would come One who would change the world for all time to come? The lives of their sons would not be without pain and suffering and horrible deaths. Yet, two thousand years later the world is still offering blessings to Jesus and John the baptizer...and to their wise mothers who taught them both to respond to all of life with the same words that Mary offered: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word—you have my blessing."

To give someone or some thing your blessing means to be on the Mary-side of life. It means to surrender your wisdom to the wisdom of God. It means to give up control and open your eyes and heart to the larger realm of God and say, "I bless you in the name of Christ; now go in peace." So let it be... AMEN.

**Micah 5:2-5a**

2But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
    who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
    one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
    from ancient days.

3Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
    when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
    to the people of Israel.

4And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
    in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
    to the ends of the earth;

5aand he shall be the one of peace.

**Luke 1:46b-55**

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