

“Upside Down”

(Luke 2)

On Wednesday, as countless snowflakes fluttered and flat out refused to stop falling upon our driveways, many of us found our plans for that day postponed. Sitting at our dining room table that morning, however I was determined that I would be productive and get some reading done. But the uncontrollable giddiness of having a day off from school sent Ethan and Olivia almost bouncing off the walls. Now I don't know if they actually worked out a plan to come and make sure I'd re-read the same sentence over and over and over again, but it was nothing short of masterful. Soon, I realized what an amazing invention snow pants, winter coats and those full face masks are to send the kids out to play in the knee deep snow. Settling back into my devotional, Livy soon was back inside with wet gloves. A dry pair securely on her hands, a quick pat on the head, and I am now I actually reading a second sentence. Until Livy comes back in with wet gloves, we know this about our beloved child, so we are well prepared. A third pair of gloves on her chilly hands, a word of caution about not taking her gloves off to eat snow, and she is back outside and I am finally finishing a paragraph. Until Livy is back in, big tears on her face, gloves with I think one small patch of snow stuck to the back, and we are about in full mitten crisis mode. We are prepared, but how many gloves can one child go through in five minutes? The answer for the world record is four and then Ethan chimes in wanting me to help him make a snowman. So, I set down my book, pull on my boots and coat, and go outside. Gina and I spent the next half hour making snowmen as the children played with sticks and carrots and occasionally brought balls of snow over to our creations. Sometimes, friends, life does not always work out the way we'd planned.

Now, you don't need my story from Wednesday as another exhibit to know the truthfulness of that statement. Experiences within your own life of relationships you thought would endure that come to an end or an abrupt change in your career or even an unexpected opportunity to go somewhere you always dreamed of going; these unexpected moments help to add topography to our life's journey. Like some kind of rollercoaster, we are often not sure when the next twist, turn, dip, or soul spinning experience might happen. Life does not always work out the way we'd planned. Sitting here in this place, it might be easy to intellectualize this truth or drone on and on about the best laid plans of mice and men; whatever that means. But, the reality is that sudden shifts in the road of life affect us emotionally and spiritually. We realize in those moments that we are not quite as in control of our destiny as we thought, we have to come to grips with the fact that hard work, preparing the way, faithfully and patiently waiting doesn't always guarantee we'll get the results we want. And, although we don't always name it for what it is, those moments when the ground seems unsteady and unknown, we are afraid. Fear is a part of what we feel when we realize that we are not fully in control.

And in those moments when life spins and swirls, we long for genuine connections; we thirst for relationships where we can be honest and open and vulnerable. That's why I think Mary sets out on the four day, almost eighty mile trip from Galilee to some unnamed Judean town to visit Elizabeth. I suspect in those seconds right before Mary knocked on the door there was a powerful mixture of exhaustion and anticipation and relief and maybe just a bit of fear of what Elizabeth might say in response to hearing Mary was pregnant too. But in the blink of an eye any tension is resolved as Elizabeth, an older, Sarah-like figure, is the first to

witness to the good news of the new way God was about to burst into our world. In typical Luke fashion, in some ordinary home located in some unknown town, two pregnant women (one older; one younger) are the first to point out God's movement in our world. It is not the priests or the authorities or the powerful who are first in line, it is the least and those on the very fringes of society who are first to get a taste of God's hope for creation. Friends, I think that truth should stop us as people of faith in our tracks. If we take this sacred scene seriously it might make us think twice or maybe even cease trying to claim we know for certain who God is and what God is all about in our world. And if that moment doesn't do it, perhaps the wonderful song Mary sings will.

The Magnificat stands in the living stream of faithful women who have sung praises in response to encountering God's presence. Miriam takes up a tambourine and sings on the shores of the Red Sea; Deborah a wise judge sings out to God; even Sarah's laughter from the tent when she hears that she is pregnant in Genesis is a kind of beautiful song. Now, unless you are an unencumbered four year old like Olivia or find here in church most of us don't just randomly burst into song within our lives. Gina and I don't usually when discussing what to have for dinner break into a spontaneous ode about the wonders of two-day old chili in our fridge. I mean its good chili and all, but we just don't do that sort of thing. So, this beautiful hymn sung to God is at once amazing, but like many of the carols we sing during Christmas and throughout the year, also have something powerful and profound to tell us. Mary sings of a world where the poor are filled with food, the rich are sent away hungry, where those in power are brought down and the lowly are lifted up; the world as we know it is turned upside down by Christ's birth.

There was this wonderful tradition in the 9th Century church that maybe we could reclaim next Advent. The tradition was inspired by the words of the Magnificat and was called the Feast of Fools. It was a literal acting out of Mary's vision. In the church, lay brothers and servants would dress up like the priests for one day. But, and here is the rub and perhaps why the clergy stopped this practice, the servants would wear the robes inside out, put on stoles backwards, hold the prayer books upside down, and chat gibberish. To be sure, we all have mannerisms that when someone else holds a mirror up to us we might not like to see reflected back. Let's say you tend to favor a certain kind of word when inviting the church to sing. Let's say you tend to be a bit wordy. Let's say you often can fall into the trap of being too self-effacing. I think we lost the Feast of Fools in our Advent preparations for much the same reasons I might be tepid to encourage this practice too much for next year; the church tends to take itself too seriously. But at the heart of the Feast is an invitation to experience what would happen if the world as we know was turned upside down. And the challenge of the experience is would we as people of faith be able to find our voice to sing in response?

Mary's life is turned upside down by a visit from an angel. Joseph's life is turned upside down by a visit from an angel. Elizabeth's life is turned upside down when her husband Zachariah comes home unable to speak after encountering an angel in the temple. Lowly shepherds and Gentile astronomers all have their lives turned upside down. Christmas, following Jesus, turns our lives today upside down. Life does not always turn out like we've planned. In the midst of it all, we, like Mary and Elizabeth are looking for a genuine connection. We are searching for loving companions as we traverse the ups and downs of life. Friends, this is my prayer for our church as we stand on the cusp of a new year; that we would be a place of genuine, faithful, and loving connections. In the coming months and

throughout 2010 we would foster relationships that support and sustain each other. But there are other prayers, your prayers, my fellow pilgrims on the road of life right here and right now. And so, I have an early Christmas gift for you that just can't wait. These wonderful stars with your prayers on them have been compiled into a booklet. These are **our prayers** as pilgrim people, as people on a journey. Take and read, take and let these words help you prepare and wait and connect with each other in heartfelt ways. Take these prayers and may they help guide you to the place where One who turns our world and lives and souls upside down is found anew this year. And perhaps, there is no better way to bless our prayer booklet than as Mary did, with a song. Claire and JP please help us sense God's movement in our midst and help us continue to prepare a place for the One we wait to receive.