

## “Christmas—voices from the underside”

December 20, 2009

Text: *Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-55*

### I.

Working in my office on Wednesday afternoon, I received a telephone call from a nine-year old little girl named Sarah. I had no idea why she might be calling me. I virtually NEVER receive phone calls from children. Anyway, we were talking in English and she was trying to make some connection between her family and our church ...

Soon, the conversation moved to her parents ... her father was in jail and her mother had just been operated on and was now home recuperating. After some more friendly conversation, I asked her if I could talk to her mother. She said her mother only spoke Spanish. To which I replied, *no importa, yo hablo Espanol*.

So, she put her mother on and, as you would expect, there were all kinds of problems, many of which were related to money. To begin with, there were three daughters ... Sarah was the oldest ... and ...

- she didn't have any detergent to wash the girls' clothes which had been piling up.
- she needed a special bar soap (Dove) for her one daughter with allergies.
- She had this telephone bill that needed to be paid or she was going to lose her telephone service. The usual sort of stuff.

Finally, I concluded our phone conversation, agreeing to come by later that evening (Wednesday) with the detergent and the bar soap.

But what struck me in all of this was this innocent little nine-year-old girl, reaching out on behalf of her mother. No doubt this wasn't the first time she had been thrust into this role ... of being an advocate for her mother and for her family.

How can our hearts not go out to the innocent ones ... the little ones ... the defenseless ones ... the ones, utterly dependent on parents and family and a spirit of generosity in the community.

Sarah's is a voice from the underside ... from the side of community life that we, in our relative comfort here in Miami Lakes, don't often hear from.

### II.

Listen to another voice from the underside; it's the voice of Mary in the gospel of Luke. Luke's is the gospel known for compassion and its concern for social justice. It's the

gospel that has—by far—the most women walking through its stories. Luke’s is a voice for the deprived, the disadvantaged; a voice for the little ones, the ones so often left out.

Here’s Mary, a young peasant woman, overflowing with humility and wonder at the news of the angel Gabriel that she will bear a son ... and that his name would be Jesus ... and he would become great and would be called **Son of the Most High God** and that he would save his people from their sins.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.  
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me ... and holy is his name.*

And then the voice from the underside sounds out ... a voice of justice, pointing to a new ordering of things:

For God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors ...

### III.

This voice of Christmas, too, is from the underside. It’s the voice of Mary, mother of Jesus. Mary, young and innocent—utterly dependent on forces swirling around her ...

... this voice of Christmas is a voice of compassion and justice. It is a voice on behalf of the poor, the destitute, the deprived, those thrust to the margins of life. It’s a voice from the underside.

**God has scattered the proud** ... those who are so full of themselves ... for whom, it’s always about them. The ones who never really see life on the underside ...

- life in the homeless shelters ... life at the soup kitchens ... life underneath the bridge ... life in the half-way houses, the convalescent hospitals ...
- life in the subsidized housing projects where mothers like Sarah’s mother find themselves locked into lives where they’re just trying to make it through another day of life ...

**God has scattered the proud**, sings Mary.

And *God has brought down the powerful from their thrones ...* those who like to control and manipulate everything for their own benefit; the ones who always seem to have the advantage.

They live in the right neighborhoods, go to all the right places ... know the right people ... always have the right connections. Somehow, they're always in the right tax bracket, have the best health insurance, the best retirement program.

They are no doubt good people, but they seldom see much of life on the underside—life *on the other side of the tracks*.

This voice of Christmas, the voice of Mary, mother of Jesus, is a voice the world cannot silence. For on the underside of all the pomp and glitter, Mary sings on ...

- A word of justice ... a word of hope and promise ...
- a word of leveling off ... of leveling the playing field ...

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty ... he has helped his servant Israel ... according to his promise ...*

#### IV.

This voice of Christmas, from the underside, is a voice that helps us all remember the little ones ... like Mary, utterly dependent, in a world with danger lurking near by. It's a voice which rises up again and again in our biblical stories, which we embrace anew each year in Advent.

In Luke's Christmas narrative, you may remember what's known as the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, at the conclusion of Luke 1 (12 verses after Mary's Magnificat) —where Zechariah, the father of **John the Baptist**, is filled with the Spirit ... and, in humble tones, he speaks out ...

- about his people, in need of a Savior ... of one who would rescue Israel;
- about God's tender mercies and promises to our ancestors;
- and about remembering God's holy covenant ...
- and serving God, in holiness and righteousness, without fear.

In humble tones, from the underside, the Spirit speaks out. It's a Spirit of reckoning and leveling; a spirit of hope on behalf of the lowly, on behalf of the little ones, like Sarah and her two sisters, (and countless millions like them) trapped in life-situations and life-styles that easily become cyclical—life styles where hope struggles to break through.

But hope IS what it's all about and that's why—no matter what—we can never give up ... never give up hope for children anywhere, in whatever situation of deprivation and

want. We must never stop hoping for the unemployed, the sick, the infirm; for the lonely and isolated, the estranged and alienated. We must never relent in our hope for the depressed and the disconsolate.

This hope is the very heart-beat of what Christmas is all about.

- It's this hope, rising up from a bed of straw in a Bethlehem manger ...
- this hope, that excited the shepherds and inspired the wise men ...
- this hope that fills the air at Christmas, creating the feelings of the season.

It's a hope that can not be held back.

The voices from the underside know this hope and they treasure it. Sometimes, it seems, it's all they have.

## V.

The hope of Christmas—from the underside, the overside, from whatever side—is the hope that will not let us forget that God loves us ... that we are loved, valued and treasured.

I hear all the time about folks who say they've lost their faith ... or perhaps, for whatever reasons, they've never had much faith to begin with. Fair enough; we're human ... all the time stuff is happening; and moreover, faith is something we have to work at to maintain.

However, Christmas and the biblical story are not so much about us believing in God as they are about God believing in us. No matter our life situation ...

- no matter whatever we were yesterday ... no matter if we've fallen on hard times.
- no matter all of our losses and failures ... or all of our successes and triumphs.

God believes in us; and God calls us to the promises of tomorrow. God wants so much for us to be well—to be healthy and happy, fulfilled, successful; and alive to all the beauty and promise that God spoke into our lives on our birth day. That's what God wants ... and God never stops wanting it.

The spirit of peace that fills the air at Christmas wants the Sarah's of the world ... all the children of the earth, in whatever situation of deprivation and want, to have a chance—a glimmer of hope—to lead fulfilling and productive lives; and to be able to achieve their potential and do their part in glorifying God and making the world a better place.

## VI.

By the way, on behalf of our church, I visited Sarah and her family Wednesday night, in a subsidized apartment complex a half mile or so from Country Club of Miami. I took them the detergent and bar soap the mother had requested. I also took their phone bill with me when I left and made sure they got well-included in our Angel Tree ministry.

During my brief visit, a couple of things leaped out at me ...

First, the mother, understandably, was overwhelmed. No doubt, for whatever reasons, she'd had a tough life. For all of us, stuff happens.

But the little girls—her daughters—nine, seven and three, respectively; they were adorable ... innocent, seemingly joyful ... just little girls, full of some level of expectation ... just trying to navigate their way through life.

I couldn't help but believe that all they lacked was opportunity and a healthy mommy and daddy to tuck them in along the way. How could God NOT believe in them?

Wouldn't God want them, too, to be able to sing one day:

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...  
For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

May it be so!

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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