

UPSIDE DOWN AND BACKWARDS

Luke 1:39-55

When I headed home from my first trip to Israel, my suitcase was opened and searched by Israeli security at the airport in Tel Aviv. Their x-ray had detected ceramic items in my suitcase. They were plates I'd purchased as gifts for church staff. It seems that terrorists like to hide explosives inside ceramic pieces. Later, I learned of another tourist who bought a ceramic nativity set in Bethlehem. As he went through security for his flight home, he too was forced to open his bags and allow Israeli soldiers to pick through his belongings. They found Mary and Joseph, shepherds and sheep, Wise Men and cattle, and the baby Jesus. The man asked, "Why are you making such a fuss? They are just figurines." To which the soldier replied, "Yes, but they could be explosive."

Do you know what? In a way he's exactly right. The baby Jesus exploded on the scene and turned the world upside down. We need to take care as we approach the manger. The child wants to rearrange pecking orders, reprioritize values, and turn around life-styles. Jesus holds explosive stuff.

The custodian of our church in Lincoln, NE had a daughter who lived in Australia. She married a man from Sydney and made her home there. Chuck and Ada saved their money for several years and made the trip from Nebraska to Australia to visit their daughter and son-in-law. When Chuck came home from having been "Down

Under” he was incredulous about the place because, he said, everything was upside down and backwards there. When they went it was fall in Lincoln and spring in Sydney. Here we speak of the “Deep South” and there they speak of the “Deep North.” When you flush the toilet here in swirls counter-clockwise, there it swirls clockwise. Here Christmas is in winter, there it is in summer. Upside down and backwards.

Listen to a Christmas carol from “Down Under.”

Carol Our Christmas

Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas;
Snow is not falling and trees are not bare.
Carol the summer and welcome the Christ Child,
Warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.
Sing of the gold and the green and the sparkle,
Water and river and lure of the beach.
Sing in the happiness of open spaces,
Sing a nativity a summer can reach!
Shepherds and musterers move over the hillsides,
Finding not angels but sheep to be shorn;
Wise ones make journeys whatever the season,
Searching for signs of the truth to be born.
Right side up Christmas belongs to the universe,
Made in the moment a woman gave birth;
Hope is the Jesus gift, love is the offering,
Everywhere, anywhere here on the earth.
(Music by Colin Gibson, lyrics by Shirley Murray)

I was struck by something William Willimon wrote in a magazine to which I subscribe: “Odd we come to Christmas thinking of Christmas as the time that sets everything

right. Christmas is the time to come home, to return to that time in our memories when all was warm and good and right, when everything that's come upside down in our lives is set right side up, at least for a few days in December." (2) According to Mary, however, Christmas is the time when God turned everything upside down and backwards. After Mary received the angel's news of her pregnancy and her cousin, Elizabeth called her "*blessed among women*" because of the one she bore, Mary sang what is the first Christmas carol ever – the Magnificat.

"My 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."

Mary sings of a world turned upside down and backwards. The high and mighty are brought low and the lowly are uplifted. The hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty. Mary's personal world

was flipped on its head and then she sang a carol of the child in her womb, who would dislodge, disrupt, and disturb many other people's worlds. Later, one of the charges that would be made of the people who followed her baby was, "*These people are turning the whole world upside down.*" (Acts 17:6)

Mary herself is evidence of such a divine inversion.

She's an unwed peasant teenager bearing the Son of God. It doesn't fit by worldly standards and values. However, God had already declared, "*My ways are not your ways, neither are your thoughts my thoughts.*" (Isaiah 55:8) In our society we adulate those we deem successful, talented, distinguished, or beautiful. Yet, God chooses a black preacher from Georgia to lead a civil rights revolution and a tiny Polish nun in India to teach the world what compassion means. It is as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "*Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many of you were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*" (1 Cor. 1:26b-29)

Luke further illustrates God's reversal of fortune by sharing with us Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus says that in God's kingdom it will be the poor, hungry, mourning, and martyred who are blessed, while the rich, well-fed, laughing, and adulated will suffer.

Likewise, Luke tells Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this life Lazarus was destitute and begged by the gate of the rich man's house. The rich man ignored and forgot him. Both died. Lazarus went to paradise and the rich man to Hades. The rich man called to Lazarus across the chasm for water but Lazarus was unable to help, the chasm was too deep and wide. (3)

Christmas just doesn't intend to be a time that everything returns to settings we want and expect. It's the time when God turns things upside down and backwards. Luke wants to know that, according to Jesus, our world right side up is not what God wants because it is not what is best for us and for all. The New Testament is chocked full of stories of people like Mary who got themselves flipped over and turned inside out, when Jesus got a hold of them. People like blind men and bleeding women, like rich young rulers and poor fishermen, like prostitutes and tax collectors, like Peter, Andrew, James and John, and most of all like Paul. Jesus did a number on all of them.

They met their sophomore year at Duke University. It was an informal meeting about a spring student mission to Honduras. The campus fellowship groups try to send three teams to this 3rd world country per year. They seldom return the same people as who went down. He told the chaplain that after they met that night they dated and things were going great between them. "We are going to Honduras together and who knows where it might lead for us," he reported. So, that day just prior to Christmas

break, when the chaplain saw him on campus looking dejected, he asked him, “What gives?”

“Marianne isn’t going to Honduras,” he gloomily replied. “I’m sorry,” the chaplain answered. “Can’t she afford the time?”

“No, it’s not that,” the student answered. Marianne said her older sister, Jean, went down there and it changed her. When she returned home and went back to school, she changed her major from pre-law to nursing. When she graduated, she returned to Honduras to work in a free clinic. It made mom and furious and scared. Marianne said Jean got turned upside down.” (4)

Christmas is but two days away. Be careful. The baby Jesus is explosive.

Sources:

1. *Pulpit Resource*, Vol.25, No.4, p.48.
2. Ibid. I am basing this sermon theme on Willimon’s comments therein.
3. Fred Craddock makes these observations in *Interpretation, Luke*, JohnKnox, p.30.
4. Adapted from *Pulpit Resource*, cited above.