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Advent Hope: Reversal

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Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55

A friend of mine who served as a leader in the national church for many years used to include a particular phrase in every sermon or speech I ever heard him give. No matter the occasion or group he was addressing, at some point he would say, usually near the end, “Christ came to turn the world literally upside down.”

Several of us started noticing this repeated declaration and at church gatherings where he spoke, we would glance at each other, waiting for the shoe to drop, and then smile when he finally got around to it in his remarks. “Christ came to turn the world literally upside down.” Then he would make the point that the Christian Church should join in that good work.

At first it struck me as an odd thing to say: “literally turn the world upside down?” But over time I began to realize that he was living in a kind of perpetual Advent, offering a latter-day version of Mary’s Magnificat, or an expression of the vision of the prophet Isaiah for our time. Both Mary and Isaiah spoke of their expectation that one day the world would be turned on its head in a great reversal of the way things were. It was an unbelievable vision, as impossible as my friend’s phrase had initially struck me.

For the prophets of old the fulfillment of their long-held hope was something they could only imagine – like the desert blossoming. No doubt Isaiah had spent years walking across the hardscrabble, parched earth of Palestine, up the barren hills and down into the thirsty wadis – the dehydrated streambeds that dot that landscape still today. Our longing is greatest in wild and lonely places like that.

Some years ago, on one of our pilgrimages Beth and I walked 65 miles across that terrain. It is still dry and rocky, foreboding and unforgiving. And that is the landscape where Isaiah dares to imagine a world that might suddenly look like a Minnesota garden in summer.

What the prophets yearned for – the poor lifted up, foreigners treated well, those in exile coming home, the promises of God fulfilled – was so far-fetched, given present reality, that they drew on imagery that seemed absurd to describe it. It took a lot of creative energy to conjure up a time when the arid, silent land might break forth in watery song, but that's what Isaiah saw when he peered into the hope of God's people for a new day.

A world literally turned upside down.

Not only would the wilderness begin to bloom, but the eyes of those who could not see would open. The legs of those who could not walk would lift them in leaps of joy.

And those carried away to a far-off land would return home.

“A highway shall be there,” the prophet says.

“And it shall be called the Holy Way...it shall be for God’s people, no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.”

No lions, no ravenous beasts, no one losing their way, as I often do on a pilgrimage; instead, a clear path through the trackless desert toward our deepest hope.

The texts of Advent invite us to use our imagination. If this pre-Christmas season didn’t exist, we’d have to invent it, because our hearts are nearly closed and our minds too narrow to receive the extraordinary news on the horizon. We need help to be ready for it. Our lives need to be

stretched open – wide enough to let in the Light about to enter the world.

In this season the ancient seers invite us to exercise our capacity to see beyond – beyond the feeling that the world is in hopelessly bad shape and there's not much we can do about it, beyond the sense of lost connection and abandoned community, beyond the place where love is distant and the light barely flickers.

If we cannot break free of our fear and anxiety, and shake off our pervasive despair, and let go all else that distracts us from hidden truths that give rise to hope, then Christmas will land with a thud. We will find ourselves in the same old wilderness, stumbling in the night.

The world needs more than that, and so do you and I.

On the way to Bethlehem, through Advent, we carry this hope for a great reversal – a world turned upside down by love that changes everything, where priorities that center ourselves are upended by compassion for others.

The turnaround for which we hope in this season will not always come in major decisions or all at once in new policies aimed at altering systems. It will more typically come in increments, in kind words or a helping hand or small efforts by people to make the world align more closely to God's intentions.

Last Sunday a team from Westminster flew to Cuba to install a clean water system in a local church in Havana. The church is located in El Cerro, the poorest neighborhood in the already impoverished capital city of that island nation. Millions of people around the world live with no access to clean water; several thousand of them live in El Cerro. This week that changed.

Clean water is the most elemental human need. Maybe that's why it keeps reappearing in the visions of the prophets of old. Without clean water, human beings, especially children and elders, those most vulnerable, simply cannot be healthy.

In the last few years Westminster's clean water team has worked in partnership with local Cubans to install eight systems in churches or hospitals. Other Presbyterians working with Cuban partners have installed an additional 55 systems across the island. In every one of those 63 communities, access to clean water has turned the world upside down. Literally overnight. Where before people were chronically ill – one man told me he'd had intestinal problem for 90+years until he had clean water, and children that had been sick all their short lives within a day or two were better – all of them immediately saw their health improve, particularly the kids. We've watched it happen again and again.

Late last Thursday our team sent word that clean water was flowing in El Cerro. They're singing with joy today in Havana.

"The desert shall rejoice and blossom," says the prophet. "It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing."

For Mary the world turning upside down was a bit more personal than for Isaiah. It didn't take much imagination to sense the new life stirring in her very body. She had an intimate understanding of the great reversal God was bringing into the world through the opening of her womb. She, too, sang with joy and hope: the proud would be scattered in the imagination of their hearts, the powerful brought down, the hungry filled with good things, the rich sent away empty because they had no need, and the lowly lifted up.

As any new parent knows, things are never the same after the birth of a child. Christ may have come to turn the world upside down, but in short order that little baby will also upend the world of Mary and Joseph. The reversal Jesus brings happens not only on a global scale; it also starts within each of us, challenging us to examine where our own lives need to be turned upside down.

Advent and Christmas are not spectator sports. This is not the World Cup where we stand back and watch others do the hard work. This is our work. Advent and Christmas only have genuine meaning if we participate.

“Say to those who are of a fearful heart,” Isaiah says, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’”

The true Christmas gift for each of us would be the courage and strength to make changes in our lives we know are long overdue. Maybe we need to ask for or offer forgiveness, or seek to reconcile with someone. Perhaps

we can finally work on ending a destructive habit, or try to live more generously toward others. Maybe we can let go of the need always to be right – that’s one for me – or rethink the way we spend our time and money. Maybe we’re due for a deep self-examination of our biases.

Perhaps it’s time to put our faith closer to the center of our lives, to develop a practice of daily prayer, to see Christ in every person.

The world is about to turn, according to Isaiah and Mary. The stories of the life of Jesus give vivid testimony to what that looks like. The one with leprosy is cleansed. The woman rejected for her bleeding, healed. The ones cast out for who they are, restored to community. Children brought from the margins to the center. Truth being spoken to power and privilege.

And then there’s the greatest reversal of all, the one stretching from incarnation...through a life...to crucifixion...to resurrection.

It's Advent, and soon it will begin. Christmas will upend everything we thought we knew about life, and death.

My soul cries out with a joyful shout, Mary sings – and we join our voices to hers, for the world is about to turn.

My friend was right: Christ does come to turn the world literally upside down, and you and I, we can help if we give ourselves to the babe who comes.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.