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# GOD IN THE LOWLY:

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*Song From the Underside – Luke 1:47-55*



DECEMBER 14, 2014  
PASTOR BRAD  
From a sermon by Rev. Cindy Weber

### Song From the Underside -- Luke 1:47-55

I heard a cool definition of the meaning of Incarnation: it's that 'God is more taken with the agony of the earth than with the ecstasy of heaven.'

When I read the book of Luke, I am always amazed to hear the revolutionary words that spring from young Mary's mouth when she visits her cousin Elizabeth to share the news of her surprising pregnancy. And I wonder who taught them to her: a sister, a brother, a mother, a father...I can see her nodding off to sleep as these revolutionary words, words that she would perhaps only fully come to understand much, much later, were sung, and I can imagine the baby Jesus, and later the toddler Jesus, nodding off to sleep at the sound of his mother's voice:

*God has shown strength with God's arm,  
the mighty put down from their thrones,  
the hungry are filled with good things,  
the rich are sent empty away...*

While I'm not certain that Mary could have really understood what those words would mean in their entirety, it is striking to me that she, as a young girl, would have such a deep knowledge and sense of the way that God was working upon the earth, was coming upon the earth. But then, perhaps it's all a matter of perspective.

As we look at the book of Luke, we see that the perspective of the participants in the birth of Jesus was always from the underside. These were not the movers and shakers of their society. These were not the people that all the world was watching. No, indeed. In this story, the good news comes to those who live on the fringes of society it comes to the poor; it comes to the obscure; it comes to the oppressed. And Luke is brilliant in the way that he gets that point across.

He begins each section of the story with a list of the rich and the famous. This is who was in charge, he says; this is who all the world was watching. And then he puts that up against the places where God was working...

*In the days of Herod, King of Judea*, he says, and then he cuts to this obscure, little old couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth, cousins to an even more obscure young girl named Mary...

*Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...while Quirinius was governor of Syria*, he says, and then he cuts to this pitifully poor little birthing scene, in a stable, with a feeding trough for a cradle, and an illegitimate

mother and father miles from home, where the visitors are shepherds, *am haarets*, the people of the land, the poorest of the poor. Steve Shoemaker, in his book, *God Stories*, points out that shepherds had such bad reputations that they were not allowed to hold office or to be admitted to a court of law as witnesses.

“Luke’s shepherds were not rosy-cheeked choirboys with treble voices, fake beards, and paper mache crooks. They were more like guys with a week’s stubble of beard who paint houses by day and drink their way from bar to bar by night. Their music was more Merle Haggard than Bach. In our day think of migrant farmers or truck drivers, or the guys who line up on the street looking for day work. These were not the boys from *My Three Sons*, more like – if you remember the old *Bob Newhart Show* – “Larry, my brother Darrell, and my other brother Darrell.”

“Still the earliest accounts of the birth stories agree: the first people to whom the angels appeared and told the good news of Jesus’ birth were shepherds. And the first witnesses to the Incarnation were shepherds -- the people that the law of the land would not allow to be witnesses in a court of law.”

*Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Itureaea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias wa tetrach of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, he says, and then he tells us how the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness...*

This is who the world is watching, says Luke, but *this* is where God is working, and are not *not* one and the same...

Today it might sound something like this: In the seventh year of the reign of Barack Hussein Obama, Bob Rankin having been elected to the Colorado House of Representatives, and John Hickenlooper being governor of the land, and Ellen DeGeneres being the most popular person on TV, with Kim Kardashian coming in a close second, the Word of God appeared to a Palestinian mother, or to a teenager from Rifle.

*It was scandalous! This Word overlooked the ruling powers, both secular and religious, and went straight to the edges of acceptability--to the wilderness. The lesson was, if you want to understand the reign of God, look in unexpected places. Go to the margins.*

Mary was able to voice so beautifully what God was doing in her midst because of her perspective. She was able to sing about God exalting the humble and bringing down rulers from their thrones, she was able to sing about God filling the hungry with good things and sending away the rich empty-handed without batting an eyelid because she knew all

about it. She knew what it was like to be oppressed, and she knew who the oppressors were.

You know, many of us would take offense at these words -- I mean, if they weren't Mary's words. We put up with them because Mary said them. But we are a little defensive, nonetheless.

*God has shown strength with God's arm,  
the mighty put down from their thrones,  
the hungry are filled with good things,  
the rich are sent empty away...*

"But doesn't God love the rich, too?" we ask. "Doesn't God love the powerful, too?" I would venture to say that the reason that these words make us feel defensive is because we are more in cahoots with the rich and the powerful than we are with the poor and the oppressed. If you've had your child slaughtered by one of the rich and powerful, as do so many of the mothers and fathers all over the world -- Syria, Sudan, Guatemala -- you don't have much difficulty with the idea of God bringing down the rulers from their thrones, or sending away the rich empty-handed.

If your land has been stolen from you by the rich and the powerful, and you're shanty town lean-to has been bulldozed like the community I worked in in Costa Rica, you might rather like the idea of God bringing down rulers from their thrones and sending away the rich empty-handed.

You see, it's all a matter of perspective. And what Luke is telling us is that if we want to see what God is about, then we've got to somehow learn to look at things from the underside, from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. What Luke is telling us is that if we want to see what God is up to, we need to look to, to listen to those who are on the margins. And that is one of reasons that many of us have chosen this group of people as our faith community. Because through this community, we are able to connect with those who live on the margins, to hear those songs of the underside.

We are gifted to be in a place where we have opportunity after opportunity to hear expressions of pain, dreams and visions, hopes and hurts, songs from the underside. And we need to make sure that we are making the most of that gift, as individuals and as a church. We need to be sure that we are taking every opportunity given to us, and making new opportunities to listen to the oppressed, to side with the marginalized, to stand in solidarity with those who live on the underside.

As you may or may not know, when I was drinking and using I lived in a tent for a while out in the mountains of New Mexico, and we frequently resorted to panhandling for food, gas, and of course, for beer money. I have to tell you that one thing I learned from that experience is that people are more likely to give you money for gas if you actually carry a gas can with you. But more importantly, I learned to look at the world from a different perspective – from the underside.

One of my favorite songs has always been “Oh Holy Night” -- *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks the new and glorious morn.* I get that now. More than I ever did before, I know what it’s like – I have a sense of what a truly weary world this is for some, and a sense of the thrill of hope that breaks into the broken places of life.

The story that we celebrate this morning, the coming of the angel to a young girl, the coming of the One who is more taken with the agony of earth than the ecstasy of heaven, is a story that has been so beautified, so anesthetized, so painted and polished and fluffed up that it can be hard to recognize anymore. But it still speaks, and there are still those who hear, those who see. May we be among them.

Amen.