

The Strength of God's Arm
Isaiah 61:1-11
Matthew 11:2-15

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.”
Luke 1:51-53

There is no getting around the fact that the God about to be revealed in the vulnerable flesh of a child born into poverty is a God who cares preferentially for the poor. This preference, when put to the melody of a Christmas carol, can be tolerated: *He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all. And his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall. With the poor and meek and lowly, lived on earth our Savior holy.* The problem arises when you try to translate the words of the prophet and the song of Mary into present economic arrangements. People get cranky and say preachers ought to stick to religion, especially as religion functions to underwrite the beliefs, values and familial structures of the reigning social order. An Op Ed in this morning's New York Times cites a study that says politics is to blame for religion's demise in America. The writer concludes that “Religion and politics, though often spoken of in the same breath are, of course, fundamentally different. Politics, by definition, is a public activity....[religion] is at core a personal affair. It is a relationship we have with ourselves.” Oh really? I wonder if he has ever read the Bible! Still, what *is* there to be gained, pastorally, by proclaiming the “in your face” grace of God this Sunday, when everyone has come in hopes of getting a little more into the Christmas spirit? Better to encourage year-end mission giving or alternative Christmas gifts as our way of doing the will of the God who cares preferentially for the poor. On the other hand, I cannot help but wonder if the church does us a spiritual disservice by ignoring or denying the judgment Christ's coming visits upon our ease? When Mary sings of a God who exalts those of low degree, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty

away, how are we to hear, *really hear* these words, as God's word to us?

Might it be possible, in the first place, to take seriously the substance of the reversals in Mary's song without departing from the world as we have ordered it? For instance, if the lens through which we view this society focuses on what is believed to be the level playing field of equal opportunity and on an individual's economic status based on merit, you could argue that one way to proclaim good news to the poor is to oppose extending unemployment insurance and the payroll tax break while not touching the \$2 trillion a year—or to be a bit more graphic, \$11.6 million dollars every hour of every day—earned and kept in the pockets of the so-called job-creators since June of 2001. How else will the 46.2 million citizens currently living below the poverty line, whose jobs have been lost in leveraged buy-outs or outsourcing or downsizing and whose underwater mortgages have inexplicably resulted in astonishing bonuses for others who preyed upon them, how else will they take responsibility for their own lives: learn to pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again? You further could argue that this way of ordering our lives economically will eventually allow for the creation of capital that, in turn, gives the haves the means to be charitable toward the have nots. How can the hungry be filled with good things if no one is allowed to accumulate enough good things with some to spare? You could also say that health care costs and regulations are to be blamed for the oligarchy we have become: the plight of the poor understandably worsened by the uncertain plight of the small business owner who is not about to risk expansion in this economy. I am just saying, thanks to my father, I know the reasoning that should chasten any simplistic, preacherly assessment of the tax code, for instance, favoring, as it does, the rich who are the key to the nation's economic recovery, a recovery that would, in turn, benefit the poor, in the long run, more than the strength of God's arm that would create dependency by filling the hungry with

good things and sending the rich empty away.

Yet on this third Sunday of Advent, I am haunted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's nailing of our evasion of the Magnificat's uncompromising claims. In a lecture on Jesus' call to leave everything and follow him, Bonhoeffer writes:

But we should probably argue thus: "Of course we are meant to take the call of Jesus with 'absolute seriousness,' but after all the true way of obedience would be to continue all the more in our present occupations, to stay with our families, and serve him there with a spirit of true inward detachment."...Again, if he were to say to us, "Be not anxious," we should take him to mean: "Of course it is not wrong for us to be anxious; we must work and provide for ourselves and our dependents. If we did not we should be shirking our responsibilities. But all the time we ought to be inwardly free from all anxiety." Perhaps Jesus would say to us: "Whosoever smiteth thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." We should then suppose him to mean: "The way really to love your enemy is to fight him hard and hit him back." Jesus might say, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," and we should interpret it thus: "Of course we should have to seek all sorts of other things first; how could we otherwise exist? What he really means is the final preparedness to stake all on the kingdom of God."

Jesus' first sermon also comes to mind, the one he preached in his hometown on the text before us from Third Isaiah. Initially the people marveled at the joyful words Jesus read from the scroll, until he got specific about God's preferential care for illegal aliens. Darn! This keeps getting a bit too close for comfort! He was run out of town to the edge of a cliff that day. Maybe a better strategy, if we are *really* to hear these ancient words as words to us, is to step out of present day politics and, in the second place, step back a few thousand years to consider the actual situation addressed by an unknown prophet named Third Isaiah.

First Isaiah, you will remember from last Sunday, wrote during a conflict in the 8th century B.C. between Judah and the unholy alliance of Syria and Israel. Second Isaiah wrote to exiles in Babylon during the 6th century. I think it fair to say his words were full of "hope-y, change-y" promises that left many returned exiles, at the end of the century, in despair. "*We wait for light, and lo! there is darkness,*" lamented God's people in Third Isaiah, "*and for brightness,*

but we walk in gloom.” The words that had broken them out of their bondage to hopelessness in Babylon now created conflict and vindictiveness as they faced the arduous task of rebuilding amid the ruins of Jerusalem. “For those who might have interpreted Second Isaiah’s vision as implying that they would experience a quick and painless transition to peace and prosperity,” writes Old Testament professor Paul Hanson, “the experiences of the 530s and 520s B.C.E. raised the harsh question of God’s relation to injustice and social unrest.” Third Isaiah’s words “describe the bitter enmity between rival groups in Judah. They make reference to civil and religious leaders who looked only after personal gain....They reflect a low level of community morale and a vindictive spirit...[as]...the universal vision of salvation narrows down to rigid sectarianism. Herein lies the theological challenge,” according to Hanson: “Can God’s word be found in the dissonance between the major sections of the Book of Isaiah and in the acrimonious conflict between fighting factions within the Jewish community that come to expression” in Third Isaiah?

Seems we cannot say Third Isaiah is addressing a situation that has nothing to do with our own. I could tell you more, but suffice it to say, the human condition in 520 B.C. in Jerusalem bears an uncanny resemblance to the human condition in 2011 A.D. in Washington and Cairo, in Damascus and Berlin, in Paris and Teheran, in Moscow and Mogadishu. Can God’s Word be found in the dissonance between hope and acrimonious conflict?

The writer of our text believes God’s Word is to be found precisely there. His claim is that God has intervened in human history in the person of a Servant who has been anointed to increase the dissonance: bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives (literally, tax exemption!), release to the prisoners, restoration of property to those who are in debt. But as you continue reading, you begin to realize that the Servant is the

community: God's intervention in human history is to be mediated through the presence of a righteous community. It is a community anointed to prepare the nations for the salvation God will bring, through the community's witness to a radical reversal of fortunes. A few chapters before, the prophet had minced no words in describing this witness, a witness that was decidedly more political than pious: *Is this not the fast that I choose (roars the Lord): to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly....Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say Here I am.* These are, of course, the reversals announced as though they are already accomplished in the words of Mary's Magnificat! These are the actions embodied in the witness of the community that mediates God's light in the darkness.

I think Isaiah is saying and Mary is singing to us, here and now, "If you want to see a level playing field, then look through the lens of Scripture and I will show you God's level playing field where, regardless of merit, we are given the grace to begin again together: where the proud are scattered, the powerful toppled, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled, the rich emptied." This is not good news to those who believe merit rather than mercy ought to be the order of the day and of the kingdom. This is no gospel to those who have worked hard, overcome obstacles, kept zippers zipped, followed the rules, and sacrificed immediate pleasures for future rewards.

But this is the way it always is with grace: if grace were earned and deserved, it would not be grace. No matter one's material estate or meritorious virtues, it is a fearful thing to fall

into the hands of the living God, where God's mercy alone is of any avail. Therefore "All human nature vigorously resists grace," wrote Flannery O'Connor to a friend, "because grace changes us and change is painful."

My dear friends, the Son of the God who cares preferentially for the poor, the one born of Mary whom God raised from the dead, has come to save us no less than he has come to save the hungry, the homeless, the prisoner, the oppressed, the naked, the alien, the outcast: he has come to save us from ourselves and from the world as we have ordered it and from meritorious lives lived with no need of his grace. Is he the one, or are we to wait for another in the dark of this sanctuary on Christmas Eve? Go and tell the weary world what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense. Blessed are you who take no offense at him who, with the poor and meek and lowly, lived our earth, our Savior holy.