



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 1:46-55

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A Topsy-Turvy Song

We just heard a passage known as Mary's Magnificat – a song of praise sung by Mary after she was greeted by her elder cousin Elizabeth. Both women were unexpectedly pregnant. Both will bear children who will serve the Most High God. Both are filled with joy during this front door encounter at Elizabeth's home, just west of Jerusalem. But why? Well, it was a double-confirmation of what the angel had foretold. Elizabeth knew her child was to be like Elijah, preparing the way for the coming Messiah, and this was confirmed when the baby leapt in her womb when Mary appeared. And Mary had been told that she carried the Savior-child. As proof of this amazing thing, the angel had revealed to her that Elizabeth, formerly thought to be barren, was now in her sixth month with child. Mary traveled to her cousin's house and upon seeing Elizabeth's pregnant belly knew for sure that the angel's predictions were true.

So Mary offers a song of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." She mentions that God has looked with favor upon her lowliness. Mary isn't being overly humble here. Lowliness refers to Mary's poverty. She was quite poor, a person of no status or worldly wealth; a powerless young girl coming of age in a society shaped by male-dominance and patriarchy. Realizing that she was seen and valued by God caused her heart to overflow and she sang, joining with other women of faith who'd sung to God. Like Hannah, the marginalized wife who gave birth to the prophet Samuel; or Deborah, the judge of ancient Israel in those days before people decided only men should sit on the throne; or Miriam, the co-liberator from Egypt alongside her younger brother Moses, who sang as the people crossed to freedom through the parted waters of the Red Sea.

Mary described a time when the proud are scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the rich sent away, and the poor and hungry filled with good things. It's a very topsy-turvy image. The word "topsy-turvy" comes from the Old English verb "terve" meaning to overturn things – to have the top facing down and the bottom side up. Things aren't where you expect them to be. They are upside-down, mixed up, all topsy-turvy.

Sometimes people say topsy-turvy things that surprise us and overturn our expectations. Barney Franks was a Representative from Massachusetts known for his blunt talk. He was invited to speak at an awards banquet at a gathering of American bankers. He surprised the crowd when he asked them point-blank, "Given the level of pay that those of you who run banks get, why the [heck] do you need bonuses to do the right thing?" Undeterred by

a deafening silence, he went on to say, “Do we really have to bribe you to do your jobs? I don’t get it. Think what you are telling the average worker, that you who are at the top of the system, your salary isn’t enough and you need to be given an extra incentive to do your jobs right?” The headline for the newspaper article reporting on this event was “Who invited the [guest] speaker?”¹ Similar challenging words come from Jim Wallis, the Christian social justice advocate behind the Sojourners magazine. He said, “Can anybody seriously suggest that bigger, more powerful, more profitable corporations will help protect the interests of workers, local communities, the environment, and the forgotten poor? Is it right that Wall Street profits when workers and their families suffer? Is it fair that the people who do the firing get a raise, while the fired people can only fear for the future of their families?”²

Now, the political left hasn’t cornered the market on making topsy-turvy statements. The last election cycle with its uptick in populism and anti-government rhetoric was full of statements and vitriol unthinkable to be expressed by politicians 10 to 20 years ago. That is why the secular understanding of “topsy-turvy” is actually quite problematic. Far too often in this world, turning things upside-down, scattering the proud and defeating those in power is merely an exercise in vengeance. The proud are replaced by the new proud. The vanquished tyrants give way to new tyrants from the formerly oppressed. Nothing is more demoralizing than when the party out of power comes into power, but adopts the sins and abuses of its predecessors.

The world’s version of topsy-turvy is a flawed exchange of top for bottom, of reason for irrationality, of knowledge for ignorance. But that is not the biblical understanding of this idea. Mary sings her song about scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly – in effect, making everything topsy-turvy – so that everything can be set right, reorganized, repaired, and redeemed at last.

Here’s a mundane example of what I mean. Anyone who has experienced bedtime with young children knows that part of the evening ritual is picking up toys scattered around the house. This is a tiresome but necessary task because overlooked things like nerf gun bullets, Polly Pockets, and magna-tiles will wreak havoc on the vacuum cleaner. Now, this ritual is a bit easier to impose during the month of December, because as I used to tell the kids, “Santa don’t want to step on no Legos.” Often the picking up process simply involves dumping things into bins and buckets and toy boxes. But at some point, you need to separate the game pieces from the building blocks from the doll accessories. So, you have to dump out the box; you turn it “topsy-turvy” not just to put the things on the bottom now on top, but to help put everything in its rightful place.

Mary’s topsy-turvy song needs to be taken seriously. It began with the real-life reality of this young girl and then expanded to a faithful expression of how God is at work blessing the poor and marginalized, the oppressed and forgotten. It was a song about turning things upside down so that things can be put right at last. And along with Mary and Elizabeth, we

are agents of topsy-turviness. We are instruments of God's holy work of putting things right.

Some of this work is already taking place around us. It is present when women are elected to office, diminishing patterns of male dominance. It is there in Christmas card photos that include same sex couples and on classroom rosters that are respectful about preferred pronouns or transgender student names. It is there whenever we celebrate our uniqueness while still remembering what values we hold in common. But putting things right biblically challenges us to also raise the awkward questions mentioned by Barney Frank and Jim Wallis. It calls us to ask why, according to ZipRecruiter, the average daycare worker in Milwaukee is paid \$15.76 per hour but the average fast-food employee gets over \$19.00 – and why is it that childcare in general is unaffordable for many couples? Our faith calls us to ask why non-white groups are significantly over-represented in prison and jail populations, why the criminal justice system is so skewed toward punishment over rehabilitation, and why mandatory sentencing guidelines keep these institutions dangerously overcrowded while consistently understaffed. Topsy-turvy Christians ask about better ways to care for the hungry than just food pantries – about better ways to finance our schools than property tax formulas – about better ways to protect our environment long-term beyond piecemeal approaches like avoiding plastic bags and lowering our thermostats a single degree. Much around us needs to be sorted out and put right.

Granted, this topsy-turvy process involves some uncomfortable conversations. But if the goal is grounded in what our faith calls us to be and do, then such conversations are necessary. Again, Mary is a good guide for this process. Remember she began with a song of praise, which is different from a song of thanksgiving. You thank a cashier for helping you with your purchases; you praise a young child for learning the alphabet. You thank someone for giving you a ride home; you praise an athlete after setting a new personal best. The writer Doris Donnelly has said, “We say ‘Thank you for feeding me’ or ‘Thank you for driving me.’ But praise zeroes in on the one being praised, and it sounds like this: ‘You are wonderful! How terrific you are!’ The focus shifts away from the self and onto something in the other worthy of praise.”³

When things are turned topsy-turvy and set right, our response is one of praise. For just like we pray in the Lord's Prayer, in those moments we glimpse how things might be on earth as it is in heaven. Our spirit rejoices. We're looked upon with favor. We, and those beside us, together are called blessed.

True story. When we lived in West Racine, after many years Beth and I and our kids needed a bigger home. On the final moving day, once all the furniture was gone, the pictures were down, and the rooms were empty, I felt nostalgic as I looked at our prior house. I saw the rooms, the staircases, the places where we'd become a family and which we were leaving now forever. My son was five years old at the time and I asked

him what he thought about the house now that it was empty. He glanced around and then with a grin of pure joy he said, "Look, they're all dancing rooms now." And soon he was off, spinning and running and laughing, a topsy-turvy response to my question.

When the angel visited Mary, the good news was that the world was a place where things can be set right – where reversals are possible – where peace is waged more successfully than war – and where we can dance and sing songs of praise. So, stand beside Mary and Elizabeth and be praise-givers, rejoicing in what God in Christ has done and the topsy-turvy ways, by God's grace, things are being set right all around us. AMEN.

¹ New York Times, December 5, 2004

² *Sojourners*, March-April 1999

³ Doris Donnelly, *Spiritual Fitness*, pp. 24-5.