

Sunday – December 11, 2011
Pastor – Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **The Testimony of John**

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Scripture: **John 1:6-8, 19-28**

John mainly wanted people to understand that he was not the Messiah, or Elijah or any other prophet. He was the Forerunner, the Precursor, the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He bowed to no other but Jesus, but he knew his role, his place in the scheme of things, so he wasn't trying to impress the Pharisees by claiming to be someone he wasn't. Jesus was the Light. John bore witness to the Light. He proclaimed the coming of the Light into the world. John was the last OT prophet and the first NT evangelist (even while still in the womb). If history were a washing machine, he would be the click between the wash cycle and the rinse cycle.

The passage we heard during the advent candle lighting is called The Magnificat, from the first word in the Latin translation, which in King James English would be "My soul doth magnify the Lord." This is the song Mary sings after she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth, an old woman pregnant for the first time, with a son they would call John. John leaps in the womb, recognizing that Jesus was in Mary's womb. When Elizabeth tells Mary about this, Mary starts to sing The Magnificat.

Like John, Mary is humble, not claiming to deserve the honor of being the mother of God's own son. But, her song is about more than her personal experience. (UMH p.199)

For 32 years, I've read this in church or heard it read. I've preached on it. But, this year, for the first time, it seemed very relevant, almost ripped from the headlines. It sounds like it is addressing the concerns of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In this song, sung by Jesus' own mother, the world is turned upside down. She, a lowly servant, would be called blessed forever, because God had done great things for her. In addition:

1. The Lord scatters the proud.
2. God cast down the mighty and lifts up the lowly.
3. God feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty.

Does God choose Mary because she's part of the 1%? Well, maybe the bottom 1%. God is not only unimpressed with wealth and power, he redistributes it: scattering and casting down the rich and powerful while lifting up and feeding the lowly.

What does this have to do with Advent? The coming of Baby Jesus into the world? Could these be the ravings of some hormonally-imbalanced pregnant peasant woman who simply gets it all wrong? Why would this song be the way she responds to her cousin's recognition of her as the mother of the Messiah?

The upsetting of the status quo, either in first-century Judea or in 21st century America, seems to be God's agenda for God's people. God is not saying to the poor, "Take a bath and get a job." He is setting them down to a banquet where the rich are not welcome. He is casting the mighty down and elevating the lowly.

Maybe this is not supposed to be a complete reversal of life as we know it. But, at the very least, it is the leveling of the playing field. In the OT, there are over 600 references to the causes of poverty. In 95% of those references, the cause is oppression by the rich, the very not-level playing field that the wealthy and powerful consider their right. In Mary's song, God is saying, "No more." In the Kingdom of God, the rich don't get to write the rules to their own benefit. And, if the Kingdom of God is within us and among us as followers of Christ, we shouldn't stand for it, either.

John, the Forerunner of the Savior, was humble, living in the desert, ignoring everything about polite society or any kind of society at all. But, he was not afraid of the powers that be. Remember, he was imprisoned and beheaded for having the audacity to tell Herod the truth about Herod's self-centered misdeeds. Mary, mother of the Savior, was humble, a poor young peasant girl. But, when recognized by Elizabeth for who she was, she announces God's intention to treat the rich and powerful the way they had always treated those underneath them, bringing them down and leaving them hungry.

So, as we consider Christmas as the birthday of John's cousin and Mary's son, maybe we should think about how unlike any nativity scene we've ever seen that birth must have been, how filthy the environment, how messy the birth, how, even for peasants, this was a birth that was almost unimaginably horrifying. That's how our Savior was born, not in some pristine setting with perfectly clean parents and reverently quiet animals and a silent, beatific baby.

Jesus was not born in a palace with a team of professionals to help Mary along. He was born amongst animals, either in a stable or even in a cave - it doesn't specify in Luke 2. It only says he was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for livestock. That was unusually rough, even for the poorest of the poor.

So, we have as role models John and Mary, who embody humility. We have what has been euphemistically called a "humble birth." We should understand Christmas from the point of view of observers, but also as its beneficiaries. All this happened because God loves us. Let's never lose sight of the love of God, even during the hustle and bustle of these weeks leading up to Christmas. It is that love that gave us the Christ Child, and that love will lead us through our celebration of his birth.