

Sermon – Saturday, December 18, 2021

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The European Church in the Middle Ages celebrated something called the Feast of Fools during the Christmas season. The Feast of Fools was a festive reversal of status, where the powerful in the church and society were lampooned, and those with no power were lifted up. It was like a carnival. A mock bishop or pope was elected from among the lowliest and rode through the streets on a donkey. Lay Franciscan brothers and sisters would wear their vestments inside out, hold their prayer books upside down and wear “glasses” made of orange peels. Instead of chanting the liturgy correctly, they chanted gibberish. Sometimes the lowest subdeacon would change places with the bishop.

Though playful, the feast was a bit subversive -- turning everything about hierarchy upside down. As you might expect, the church hierarchy condemned the feast as blasphemous, yet the feast continued until the 16th century in some parts of Europe.

Subversiveness is a central theme of the Incarnation, as seen through Mary’s eyes in the Magnificat and Luke’s in the Gospel story. If we really consider the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth in light of the customs of that day, it’s actually a little absurd. Two peasant women in occupied Israel become bearers of The Message and the messenger. Elizabeth, in fact, meets all the definitions of being a prophet, which makes her the first prophet the Jews would have had in more than 400 years. Mary, an unwed teenage mother, becomes the bearer of God. Indeed, the world is turned upside-down – not just satirically as in the Feast of Fools – but in reality. The all-powerful God who created the world now is re-creating it. God is removing all the false barriers humans have put into the world to separate, judge, and rule over others. Instead, the Incarnate God will be a great equalizer who values the needs of all people over the liturgical or secular rules created by the powerful. The Incarnate God will end the Levitical sacrificial system that had been a significant part of Jewish life, replacing it with Himself and His great love. A merciful and good God will forgive the weakness of all humanity, clear the slate, and make us co-creators with God an all-new world.

The Incarnation turned the world upside down, just as Mary and Elizabeth predicted.

We tend to approach Advent as preparation for the coming of a baby. We think of Christmas as a time to celebrate the birth of a cute, sleeping child. Jesus did come into the world as a baby. But Jesus also came into the world to change it, to recreate it. Our preparation on this last week of Advent, then, isn’t to prepare ourselves to receive a silent, sleeping baby, but rather to prepare ourselves for a birth that sets in motion a change in how we relate to each other and God forever.

So how do we prepare? The first way is to recognize that God did not create a hierarchy among humans. Each human is made in the image of God. Lay and clergy, black and white, kings and peasants, bosses and workers, older and younger, men and women and nonbinary. To organize our society, we choose some people to lead, but their power isn’t absolute, and they exist to serve us rather than to lord it over us.

To prepare, we also examine our own thoughts and actions. When we are put into leadership roles, do we act to serve rather than boss others? Do we strive to get rid of false hierarchies in our society that benefit some to the detriment of others? Do we genuinely view the poor person of limited education the same way we view the affluent, well-educated one?

We also consider our connections with everyone around us. Are there relationships that are broken that need mending? In most cases, relationships become broken because we've perceived our own needs as more important than the other person's or the community's. In its own way, this is a hierarchy, too, because it implies that we are more important. Jesus wants an end to all hierarchies that divide.

As we continue to prepare for the coming of Jesus, we likely also will realize that we need this mercy that Mary, Micah, and the author of Hebrews speak of. We understand that we are called to the forgiveness Jesus gives us through his death that makes us fit once and for all. We are called to begin again and let Jesus be an even more significant part of our hearts and lives.

We hope and wait for the coming of Jesus. The time is drawing near. Yet, as we wait, I invite us to remember that we are waiting and hoping for more than just a quiet, sleeping infant.

We are waiting and hoping for a powerful God who turns the world upside down.