

Too Good To Be True

From the Advent series: Songs Of Liberation

Text: Luke 1:47; Isaiah 7:14

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Spring Lake, Michigan
Advent III, December 21, 1997

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Sometimes even the skeptic is forced to believe in the providence of God. I always have to list my sermon titles a couple months in advance; they are printed a month ahead of time, and last week how *apropos*, when hope was almost gone. But, even better today - "Too Good to be True." Maybe, maybe there's something more to it than most of the time I believe.

The songs of liberation, the song of Mary today, the *Magnificat*, is a song of praise in the conviction that God is doing something that will radically transform the landscape of the earth - the world re-imagined in another way; human existence in an alternative kind of community. With the announcement of the birth of Jesus, Mary breaks forth into praise because God is on the threshold of creating newness, a whole new world.

But, the question this Advent that I've been putting to you and we've been thinking about is, how can we who are top dogs sing the songs of underdogs? Make no mistake about it, this is a peasant song. This is a song of liberation from one who has been oppressed and a part of a people who walked in darkness and lived under the shadow of death. Listen again as Mary sings: God has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.

That's a song from down under, because the whole human situation is about to be changed. But now, after 2000 years, who are the rich and the powerful? Who are the well-fed of the earth? Obviously, it is we. How then can we honestly sing the song of the underdog, which filled the hearts of those people of ancient time with such praise at this mighty Christmas miracle of God?

Let me say just a couple of things this morning because it is a day not for heavy deliberation, but for joyful music and song. But let me say this - I am more convinced than ever that what the Gospel is about, tidings of joy, is *this* world, here and now, human existence in this present situation in which we find

ourselves. I am convinced that we have domesticated the Gospel, spiritualized it and projected it out into another age when, as a matter of fact, it is for here and now, for this place, for people, this earth, this age. Sometimes when you get an idea like that and you begin to trace it, it's like putting on glasses - everywhere you look, it's there. For example, that famous promise in Isaiah 7:14. It was given to a king who was the king of a people who were under siege and there were all sorts of international complications going on. It was about slavery or liberation in a very real political sense at the time. That was the word of God that came from the prophet to the king. And so, Mary's song - is about the transvaluation of values; it is about a grand reversal, the powerful down, the lowly lifted, the hungry fed, and the full ones sent empty away. That's what the Gospel is about, and the challenge to the people of God who, by God's grace and goodness, have become so richly blessed, full of resource and power, the challenge is to learn how to sing the underdog's song while seeking to make reality for the underdog humane and full of hope, marked by justice and peace.

The early Jewish Jesus community for which Luke wrote the story was a community that believed that in its life it was beginning to realize another way to be human. Let me say, 2000 years later, that that is precisely the challenge for us. We are free at last and the future is open. We were seriously challenged because we dared to say that sexual orientation was a matter of the diversity of God's great creation. We've been challenged because we refused to arrogate to ourselves a corner on salvation and the light of God and the movement of God's Spirit. We were challenged because we dared take another look at this book and let it come off the page afresh, not in a wooden, literalist way, but rather as the storybook of those who were encountered by the living God in their historical experience. And now we're free; now we're free to be that community of grace where joy abounds, where there are no boundaries for the love of God, where there are no exclusionary clauses to all of those who are hungry and thirsty and seeking rest.

We have a future before us to be everything that God is beckoning us to be and it has not entered into the human heart yet the things that God has prepared for those who love God and are willing to be the embodiment of all of that that was embodied in the word made flesh. Jesus, that one who was born, God's word, incarnation of God's intention, continues to be enfleshed where there are people who hear that word, who imbibe that spirit, who will be marked by that grace, and who with open heart and open mind will reach out to a world still much in darkness, to many still living under the shadow of death. In such a community there will be praise and there will be healing and there will be signs of what ultimately will be when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ.

Now, listen to the story again. It cannot be preached. It must be sung. It is a song; it is a poem; it reaches into the depths because it is so true. Listen to it and enjoy.

(The Cantata, "The Christmas Story According to Saint Luke," by Richard Hillert, continues.)