

“Reversals”  
Luke 1:39-56  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Back in 1972, one of the greatest controversies in sports history took place during the championship basketball game in the Olympics, the gold medal game between the United States and the Soviet Union.

With three seconds left on the clock, and his team down by a point, Doug Collins of the U.S. hit two free throws to put our country’s team on top, 50-49.

As the Soviets inbounded the ball, however, one of the officials stopped play because of commotion at the scorer’s table:

It sounded like the Soviets had tried call time out during the free throws.

Had their coach called one?  
Was he even allowed to call one?

The Soviets got a do-over, which allowed them to make an illegal substitution. But when their full-court pass was deflected and the buzzer sounded, the Americans began to celebrate.

They were on top of the world once again.

But then Wiliam Jones, the head of international basketball, emerged from the stands to rule that the Soviet team should get a third chance to inbound the ball. He claimed that the scoreboard operator had neglected to reset the clock, which nullified the previous play.

And THEN...when the Soviets got ready for yet another last-ditch attempt at a miracle, the referee appeared to motion for the American

player who was guarding the inbound pass to back off the inbound line...which gave the Soviet player the necessary space to throw a full-court pass to their center, who got a layup to win the game as time expired.

To this day, the U.S. squad has refused to accept their silver medals. For over 50 years, the team's silver medals have remained in a vault in Switzerland.<sup>1</sup>

Why are they still in a vault?  
You know why.

Because when you feel like you're supposed to be on top—  
and you are placed in a lower position—  
it does not feel fair, or right, or just.

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Now...I know that today's text from Luke is not about basketball.  
But it is about reversals.  
Turning things upside down.  
People in a lower position...are suddenly put on top.

Our text is Mary's Magnificat.  
And part of what Mary sings goes like this:

God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

It's a song about REVERSAL.  
God flipping the scales.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Cacciola, "We Deserve Gold Medals," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2022.

God turning the world as we know it upside down.

What does that sound like to you?

The prospect of God turning everything on its head?

Does it sound fair? Does it sound right? Does it sound just?

Mary's not the only person in the Bible who sings this way.

Her song today is an echo of an Old Testament text.

The first scripture we heard, the song that Hannah sings.

Do you remember Hannah?

Hundreds of years before Mary,

Hannah was without a child, but God gave her a son,  
who became the prophet Samuel, who anointed King David.

And in her joy, Hannah sings:

“The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.”

In other words, God's going to put the lowest rungs...on top!

What does that feel like to you?

According to Hannah, according to Mary,

God's good news is all about

**reversing the established order of things...**

Turning the status quo of society on its head.

We hear about this every single Advent.

And it often sounds poetic:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, writes Isaiah.  
 The leopard shall lie down with the kid.  
 The calf and the lion and the fatling together.

It's a beautiful picture of peace in God's world.  
 May such a reversal take place very soon, right?  
 With every warring nation, every deadly conflict.

Isaiah's picture of peace always sounds like good news:  
   what we pin our hopes on,  
   what we're called to work toward...

What doesn't always sound like good news, at least, not to everyone, is Mary's song today.

When you start paying closer attention to it, the quality of the news depends on the position in which you find yourself in Mary's song.

The lowly lifted up.  
 The powerful removed from their thrones.  
 The hungry filled with good things.  
 The rich sent away empty.

Look, I'm not the wealthiest person in the world, and neither are you, but most of us are rich—very rich—when our standards of living are compared to the living standards of the vast majority of people in God's world.

Does that mean, when God shows up, you and I get sent away empty?

And we may not sit on a throne, but we have power, much more ability to determine and control the course our lives than plenty of other people in God's world.

Does that mean when God arrives, our power goes away?

You see, there's something in Mary's song that makes me nervous. It suggests that when God shows up, God comes not just to comfort us.

But to judge us.  
And to change us.  
And to reverse the established order of things in our own lives of faith.

Now truth be told, REVERSALS are sometimes necessary.  
Even in church.  
Especially in church.

Years ago, when I was serving a different church in a different Presbytery, there was another pastor in that Presbytery named Jack Cormack. Jack tells of the day when a visitor came to his church. And that visitor sat down in one of the pews, and got ready for worship.

And a long-time member of the church walked in just before worship. She went up to that visitor, and she said, "Excuse me. You're sitting in my place."

And the visitor stood up and gave the member her seat.  
And then that visitor started walking—but not to a new seat.  
He walked right out the doors of Jack Cormack's church, and never returned again.

Well...if I had been pastor at Jack's church, I don't know that I could've restrained myself. I imagine saying something to that church member, being very direct, asking her if she really thinks she owns that pew.

But Jack didn't operate that way.

Instead of singling the woman out, Jack Cormack got the Worship Committee together, and they came up with a plan. One Sunday, they printed different color bulletins:

red, green, blue, pink—  
distributed at random...

And at the start of worship, Jack made everyone in church stand up, and go sit with the people who had the same color bulletin.

Well, the congregation was squirming in their seats, turning the wrong way, getting whiplash trying to figure out where their friends were. He said it was the most uncomfortable day his church had experienced in years.

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And yet, it was a necessary day.

Because something in the established order of how Jack's church practiced hospitality...it needed to be reversed.

As Jack told his congregation, "To be a Christian means to give your seats away."

Now don't misunderstand.

I'm not suggesting any of you would kick a visitor out of "your" seat.

But it's hard to sit in a new place, isn't it?

Where are you sitting this morning?

Is it the same place you usually sit in this room?

It's hard to have our habits changed.  
It's hard to have our status quo overturned.

And yet, this is PRECISELY what Mary says will happen.

When God comes, things will look different.

When God arrives, things that we thought were set in stone about our lives...and our standing...and our position and our power and our pocketbooks and our place...they're going to get REVERSED.

Have you ever thought about the things in your life that need to be reversed, turned upside down by God?

There are, I am sure, things that you and I would be very eager for God to reverse.

The illness that is present in your body or in a loved one's body.  
You pray every day that God will provide healing.  
It would be the best news in the world if that illness could be reversed.

But the reversal that's promised by God is not only about those parts of our lives that we are desperate to change. It's also about those parts of our lives that we assume need no change.

How about that ambition that took you to the top of your profession?

And all the money you earned?  
And all the accolades received?  
Your single-minded desire to get to the top and say:  
I did this! I earned it!

Perhaps Advent is a good time to reflect on that ambition.  
Perhaps it is the very part of your soul that God is ready to reverse.

Or perhaps some of you possess a FINE-TUNED ABILITY  
to endlessly beat yourself up for a mistake.

This habit, it keeps you demanding perfection in yourself, and in  
other people.

Maybe, when God comes into your life, God will say:  
“I wanted forgiveness, not endless guilt.  
I wanted faithfulness, not perfection.”

Maybe your desire for control,  
getting everything exactly right,  
is what needs to be turned upside down and on its head.

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One of the best descriptions I’ve ever run across  
of what God’s promised reversal might look like,  
came from the pen of the late Southern writer,  
Flannery O’Connor.

In her short story, “Revelation,” O’Connor writes about a woman  
named Mrs. Turpin.

And Mrs. Turpin loved her virtues.  
Or at least what she understood as her virtues.

O’Connor describes Mrs. Turpin as a white, educated, church-  
going woman—all virtues in Mrs. Turpin’s world—who goes to the  
doctor’s office one day.



In the waiting room, she sits among many other people who aren't like her:

another race,  
 another class,  
 another something....  
 something OTHER than Mrs. Turpin.

And she thanks Jesus that she was made who she was.

Then one of the patients, a young woman, a college student,  
 throws a book at Mrs. Turpin,  
 which hits her in the head,  
 and the student calls Mrs. Turpin  
 an "old wart-hog from hell."

Mrs. Turpin takes it as a sign.  
 Her virtues have been called into question!

She goes home, bothered and angry at God!

She rails at the Almighty:  
 "What do you send me a message like that for?"  
 "How am I a hog and me both?"  
 "If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash..."

And at that moment, Ruby Turpin receives a revelation.

What she sees—the picture God shows her—  
 is a streak of purple cutting across the sky,  
 through a FIELD OF FIRE,  
 extending as a bridge to heaven.

And all the souls of the earth are walking up that bridge.  
 But the first thing that surprises her is the order.

The so-called “trash,” the freaks, the lunatics, as she puts it—  
they’re in the front of that line.

And Mrs. Turpin’s people—  
the responsible, educated, respectable ones—  
they’re walking toward heaven too,  
but they’re in the back of the line.

And then she notices something else.  
All of the people in the back have a look of shock on their faces.  
Not because they’re in the back of the line.

But because as they get closer to heaven,  
and they walk through the field of fire,  
all of their virtues are being burned away.

The story ends with Mrs. Turpin walking back to her house.  
She hears the crickets, but they aren’t making cricket noises.

They are the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry  
field, and everybody in front, and everybody in back,  
they don’t care about their place in line anymore...  
they’re just all praising God!

Of course, O’Connor doesn’t want her reader to miss the point, so she gave the young woman in the doctor’s office who threw the book, which led to Mrs. Turpin getting mad at God, which led to her receiving this revelation from God...Flannery O’Connor gave that college student a very particular name.

Her first name is Mary.

And her last name is Grace.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Turpin's picture of how God works in the world...  
and the ways that she sees God's children...  
is reversed by Grace.

May it be true not only for imaginary people like Mrs. Turpin.  
May it be true for every child of God, including me and you.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> "Revelation," by Flannery O'Connor, in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, by Flannery O'Connor, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.