



Longing for the Light

WAITING FOR GOD
TO ARRIVE AT ADVENT

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING: ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; LUKE 1:46-55; JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

I am convinced that deep down in all of us there is a longing for things to be better. We want to see wrongs righted, we want fairness and we want justice. We desire to live in a world where people mostly get what they deserve. We want those who seek to do what is right to be repaid with rightness and those who try to harm will receive harm in return. Whether people view this as karma or something else, humans seem to have an innate sense of what justice is. They may not always be able to articulate it but they sense it. Unfortunately, a just world is too much fantasy and very little reality. We live in a world where the wicked seem to prosper, but those who do what is right can get left behind.

Although not an automatic correlation, one example from the Covid-19 pandemic can help illustrate the problem. In Canada, the 44 richest Canadians had their fortunes increase 53 billion between April and October. This is at same time where there was significant job loss and an increase to the ever present poverty in the world. We are not a just and fair society. But money is not the only measure of equity, as power, influence and prestige also matter. There is often an overlap with financial means but various societal elements and constructs can push some people to the front of the influence line and others to the back of it.

For a moment, imagine that you are living in first century Palestine. Maybe in a small town in the hill country of Judea, or even in town in Galilee. Your king is a rotten scoundrel, extremely paranoid and prone to violent outbursts. You are never quite sure how he will react to anything. What is worse, he is not really a Jew and only has power because he made a deal with the oppressor, Rome. You are abused and nobody seems to care, oppressed with no one to raise a hand for your aid. The age old story is played out all around you; the rich and powerful get richer and more powerful while everyone else has to struggle along with less and less. And you are waiting, yearning for a too long delayed liberation.

Now imagine you hear it announced that God has declared he has started to act decisively to bring redemption, righteousness and justice. Although this is speaking directly to the story of Mary and the Magnificat it is also the story of so many around the world. And this year in some way it dovetails well with things.

The Magnificat, from Luke 1:46-55, takes the name of the Latin text of the first line. Structurally it has two stanzas. The first recognizes God's activity to Mary the individual, while the second focuses on God's activity to his people, namely Israel corporately. Although Mary the individual is in mind throughout since she plays a representative role for Israel in the second stanza. Mary's song is a bit of an aside, it is one of Luke's examples of allowing the narrative to grind to a halt and give the reader and hearer time to reflect, evaluate their role and place in the story. Luke gives us time to catch our breath, he allows us, through Mary, to recognize the story she and us, as the readers, are in.

It is full of parallels and contrasts until verse 52 and 53, where there is a little bracketing. Two lines about the lowly and/or hungry are bracketed on either side by one line about the powerful. It's a lyrical collection of versus that is meant to be remembered, it's not meant to be glossed over quickly but it is supposed to get stuck in your head. One could say it is designed for us to hear and reflect and then act. This song is one that begins with Mary praising God for her experience and then giving voice to the cries for justice and hope that so many people have. Like many of us, Mary is crying out, not merely for a more just world but the just world that God has promised. Mary looks between the past, the present and future, connecting her song with what God has done, what God is doing and what God said he would do in order for this to happen.

Although not specifically alluded to in her song, Isaiah 61 speaks to the same idea. Luke will reintroduce this passage when Jesus' makes his first public ministry appearance. Jesus reads from this passage and effectively announces that he is the one who will fulfill this role. It is as if Jesus has heard his mother's song and did his own cover of it. On its own, Isaiah 61 points to a messianic age, the time of prolonged jubilee. When those who find all things in disarray suddenly find them mended again. Isaiah uses anointing language and this is messianic and new kingship language. The messenger of Isaiah 61 is destined for a specific task, this overlaps somewhat with the servant of Isaiah 40-55. This one, the one with God's spirit is the one who will act on God's behalf to reorder things as they ought to be. He will announce good news to those who are oppressed, bandage those who have heartbreak and offer freedom for the captives and those in prison. This speaks to freedom from bondage, the favour of God and vengeance.

This is the language that Luke uses to launch Jesus' ministry and this overlaps with Mary's song. The Isaiah passages gives us more as a bit further along it says. "For I love justice, hate robbery and injustice." The promised coming age will be

characterized by justice, righteousness and faithfulness. God will accomplish the justice he wants and nothing will stand in his way. But we read this justice in light of the Magnificat and a grand reversal of raising the weak and lowly and bringing down the powerful from their positions of power.

Both the story of Mary and the message of Isaiah seems to me, to be one that expects tangible actions of justice making. Injustices and wickedness like racism may be sin problems but we cannot just leave it there without dealing with the institutional elements behind them. Today, I saw some comments on the Instagram feeds of a young Canadian footballing couple. The thing that many on the internet have an issue with is that he is black and she is white. The comments use disgusting, yet all too common, racist and segregationist language that does not bear . Based on how many comments they constantly receive, I cannot fathom how many other people around the world are bombarded with this. We cannot just suggest we are only to pray that Jesus that these racists will have their hearts changed without tangibly acting against racism. And I believe the message from Isaiah and the Magnificat demand we act for the cause of justice.

This is true with money and poverty as well. Too often we are comfortable with an exploitation of the poor, so long as we benefit. So much of the message of the first few chapters of Isaiah is a critique and repudiation of getting ahead by stepping on the poor. Isaiah is incredibly critical of acts of worship, sacrifices, burnt offerings and other elements that do not coincide with actual care for the oppressed. The Magnificat picks up on the Isaianic call to action and sees the messianic age as reversing the normal order of things. And I believe it calls us to act, and act for Justice. When Jesus came into the world, he came to reorder it around himself and this meant true righteousness and justice. The same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, went to the Temple and drove out those who used it to oppress people and exploit people. We are not called to be passive but to be just. What then does justice look like? Isaiah 61 told us. We are to tell the oppressed the good news that they are free, we are to bandage the hearts of the broken-hearted and comfort them, and we are to free those who are in captivity, even if that is systemic oppression. It is a basic call to humanize and recognize that everyone is an image-bearer. Mary could imagine this and found herself wrapped up in it and we too must allow it to transform our imaginations.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

What does it mean to stand for justice and righteousness in our world right now?