

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 23, 2024

Opposites and Reversals in God's Plan

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, with Christmas just around the corner in the middle of the week. It seems we end our Advent season with a reading about opposites and reversals. We are given a scene with two women, cousins, one who is older and had been barren for a long time, and one in the prime of her youth and unwed, both giving birth to God's plan for humanity. Both similar and yet opposites.

If we take a look at who these two children they are carrying will become, we will also see opposites. John with his strict zealot ways of eating locusts and honey while living a lonely life in the wilderness, then we have Jesus who dines with tax collectors, drinks wine and is surrounded by people most of the time.

God's plan has never fit into what humankind was planning, and he often uses reversals and opposites to accomplish his task. We've all experienced them. They're a part of every life and we often don't appreciate them.

One of my first ministry experiences took me to Mexico with church teenagers to build houses with Habitat for Humanity. The teens in my van came from very elite and wealthy parents. Not to say their families didn't earn what they had, but as with most teens, things become "a thing", the competition of who has what. I believe some of them thought they were blessed by God, but didn't really understand what that might mean.

When we arrived in Mexico our group got to meet the family that we would be building a house for. We toured their one-room shack with garage doors for walls, while the father explained that he was so grateful to qualify for our assistance. These parents and their

three children had lived in that makeshift shack for a long time. They attended church regularly and felt their prayers had been answered.

The teens we were with were a little surprised that anyone could live with an outhouse, no running water, and a compressor for electricity to manage the few light bulbs hung across the ceiling. Never mind TV's, videos, or cell phones. Yet, as kids do, while the adults were talking in the yard, the kids found a ball and some sticks and began some type of game in the street. After an hour went by, we loaded back into the van to go back to our camp. What came up in conversation was that the family in Mexico was happy. They had (to the eyes of our American youth) nothing, yet they laughed, played, and didn't complain.

In some ways the Mexican family was rich, and those American teens felt empty. It was almost in stark contrast to the American teenage saga. It seemed like a weird reversal, or opposite of what things should have been. It also seems God can take our poorest or worst times and make them meaningful.

Most of us, I suspect, tend to judge and label our experiences of reversals or opposite expectations as good or bad depending on whether we experience them for better or worse. More and more, however, I am coming to realize that the only thing I really know about the reversals and opposites in my life is that this is somehow the way God often works, throwing out the norms of expectation.

What strikes me, however, in our Gospel is that neither Mary nor Elizabeth spend time trying to understand or make sense of what is happening. They don't rationalize it or evaluate whether it's good or bad. They don't make too much of it or too little. Instead, they receive their reversal of expectations as an unfolding of something larger than themselves, of which they are a part.

I wonder if that's what Elizabeth is getting at when she says, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment." Blessed is she who believed that there would

be an opening, an unfolding, an enlarging of life. Blessed be the one who says yes, to something completely unexpected, letting God lead the way. Blessed is that one. Blessed, however, doesn't necessarily mean life is easy, we get our way, or we live happily ever after. Being blessed is about reversals as well. Look at Mary. She is the one on whom God has looked with favor. She is the one whom all generations call blessed. And she is also the one whose soul is pierced by a sword.

Maybe to be blessed means that we are awake to, and trustful of, this unfolding of life that we can't explain, control, or understand. Maybe to be blessed means that we are willing to entrust ourselves to become a part of, and hold nothing back from, that larger unfolding of life even when it makes no sense. Even when we don't know where it will take us.

And if that's what it means to be blessed, how might it change the way we see and receive the reversals or those opposite experiences of life? What if we could look at our reversals and instead of saying, this is good or bad, we entrusted ourselves to the unfolding of something larger than the individual circumstances of our lives. Maybe we should see ourselves from the view of letting God lead, rather than judge direction. Isn't that what Mary and Elizabeth did?

What are the reversals or opposite experiences that have happened in your life? When you think one thing should happen but instead something else does. Most of the stories contained in scripture show a God doing just the opposite of what is expected. It is often the second son, or the youngest one, the one who has trouble speaking, that God chooses to use for his purpose.

Today it is two pregnant women, each carrying a child that realistically was a long shot, with each child working toward bringing the kingdom of God to his people in two distinct ways. Both a curse to their established society and a blessing to the salvation of humanity.

As my teenage missionaries learned God is present, always, to rich and poor. Being blessed means we accept ourselves in God's plan including those times of experiencing opposite expectations and reversals in our lives. My prayer this last Advent Sunday is that we are now prepared for the changes that the Christ child will bring into our lives, which may contain a reversal or opposite expectation. However, it will still let us bring in the love and light. Amen.