

“Good News for Rich and Poor”

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55

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. (Luke 1:52–53)

These are powerful words, revolutionary words. They belong not to Karl Marx, but to Mary.

Christians have always been uncomfortable with these words sung by Mary, in the canticle known as *the Magnificat*. I read that when Luther translated the Bible into German, he left the Magnificat *in Latin* because the German princes who supported Luther’s struggles with Rome took a dim view of the *mighty* being brought down from their thrones.

Advent takes us places we would rather not go. It begins with a *sweet* story that has a decided *edge* to it. A young, unmarried girl was pregnant, and that was not good news. She was promised to an older man but then had a dream in which she was told that God had chosen her to bear a child. Unaccountably, bravely, Mary, perhaps only 14 years old, consented. *“Let it be to me according to your word.”* That moment of *annunciation* and *consent* has been painted many times, perhaps most strikingly in Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciation* in the San Marco convent in Florence.

But unlike the demure, submissive Mary featured in Fra Angelico’s painting, Luke’s Mary is talking about a *revolution*, an *upheaval* in values, an *overturning* of conventional mores.

Ask yourself: *What do those of us who are decidedly **not poor** make of this revolution?* We invest so much creative energy in *“wanting”* that we become economic units listening to the cultural voices that tell us that *buying*, having and accumulating will make us happy and content. In his essay *“Economics and Pleasure,”* Wendell Berry writes: *“It is astonishing . . . to see economics now elevated to the position of ultimate justifier and explainer of all the affairs of our daily life.”* Berry says: *“Decide to live by the laws of mercy and justice.”*

Since Jesus seems to have had friends and followers who were people of means, it is difficult to argue that Christianity is solely about *social reform*. It is more than that. It is about *true human need* (which includes social reform).

The problem with the rich people in the Bible is that they (often) don't seem to have *any needs*, while poor people know that they are poor and have *plenty* of needs. They also know, unlike their wealthier counterparts, that they are *dependent* on others. *That's the point*. Luke's Mary knows that the things of *real value* in this world are the *gifts* that we do not earn ourselves: *beauty, friendship, people to love*.

The Magnificat teaches a simple truth: you cannot *receive a gift* unless you have a place for it in your life. You cannot *learn anything* if you think you know it all. You cannot *receive love* unless you know there is a place in you that is empty and needs love to fill it.¹

I want you to think about these things in terms of the *perceptive insights about human nature* of the late writer, Toni Morrison.

You see, Morrison, the Nobel Prize–winning novelist and essayist who died in August, illuminates the history of this country as few writers have. Her richly imagined explorations of black life in the United States from the Middle Passage to the present day etch the past into the imaginations of her readers in deeply human detail. If we are ever able to face up to that past as a country, we will have Toni Morrison, in part, to thank.

Morrison *grounds* her profound understanding of *our history* in the lives of characters who must contend with the weight of that history and in her fine-grained attention to their ordinary moments. For example, in *Paradise*, when she describes a sleepless woman in an all-black town in Oklahoma slipping a shawl around her shoulders and walking out into the night knowing she is safe from white violence, as readers we feel the cool air on our own shoulders. When two men in *Beloved* share a quiet joke, their banter falls on our ears like a blessing. When she shows us two women sorting through a bushel basket of melons to find the ripest in *Home*, we can smell the sweetness.

¹ John M. Buchanan, *Revolutionary Words*, The Christian Century, November 12, 2012

Morrison makes her readers *work*, letting us struggle in the first pages of each book to discover where we are in space and time. But even before we get our bearings, she captures us with her *evocation of life* itself.

Under her patient gaze, the *excess presence in the world* reveals itself. In Morrison's work, the ***strange stuff*** is not separate from ***everyday life*** but is rather an integral part of it, a glimpse of its depths. For instance, the return of Sethe's dead child in *Beloved*; the murdered women in *Paradise* who take off together in a Cadillac; the mysterious zoot-suiter who appears in *Home* to bless Frank Money along his journey—this *strange stuff* draws our attention to the *inhumanity* of the system of slavery, the *vulnerability* of marginalized women to the violence of men, and the deep *human desire* for freedom.

I think this is interesting because in Advent, *with Christmas shining in the distance*, we are on the verge of a lot of *strange stuff*: *prophets* who shout themselves hoarse, *angels* who turn up in the ordinary places where people live and work. *Mary*, greeted by an angel in her own hometown, knows this stuff is strange. "How," she asks the angel, "*can this be?*"

As in Morrison's novels, the *strange stuff* of this season draws our gaze to the *margins*—to the *vulnerable* people championed by the prophets, to the *shepherds* who work while others sleep, to the *young unwed mother*. The prophets and the angels cast their *strangeness* over Advent, but they also help us see *the mystery* that is already there, *pouring out* of these lives like a blessing, *illuminating* the strange and wondrous presence of God in the midst of ordinary life.

We *set out* during Advent into a *new liturgical year*, following Jesus as he enters the world and keeps entering it, more and more *deeply*, more and more *compassionately*, more and more *courageously* as the year unfolds. Following in his footsteps means following in the *footsteps of others* who have followed him, including Toni Morrison, who took the name of the desert monk *St. Anthony* when she converted to Roman Catholicism at 12, a name her friends shortened to Toni.

In fact, the work of Toni Morrison might teach us *a new Advent practice*: ***cultivating the patient, attentive gaze of a novelist seeking to describe life as she finds it.*** For Morrison, life was *suffused* with *strange stuff* that opens toward

complexity and depth, that urges us *to look* and to keep looking, that asks us *not* to turn away from each other or from our shared history. For her, that *strange stuff* was part of the *religious dimension* of her work, for religion also points us toward *the depths* and asks us to keep our eyes open. “*Lift up your eyes and look around,*” Isaiah says to us this Advent and every Advent.²

Morrison, you see, devoted herself to *staying with the moment* long enough to *see* the strange stuff—long enough for the ordinary moment to begin to *shine* its light on us, on the *history* to which we belong, and on the world all around. This kind of *devoted attention*, this kind of *patient waiting* to see what will be revealed, is an *artistic practice* and also an *Advent practice*. May Advent make *artists* of us all.

Friends, the most significant *justice-related* implication of this passage is that *we should not overlook anyone as a possible embodiment or conveyor of God’s activity among us*. Mary is the equivalent of *today’s single mother*. Those whom society ordinarily judges and ostracizes; God looks upon with favor. Mary recognizes that she is considered “*lowly*” by those around her, but she is confident that God is working through her to fulfill God’s promises. She knows that God’s vision for the world is larger than she, but Mary is sure that she plays a part in it. We must encourage individuals to see themselves *not* as the wider world may see them, but rather *through God’s eyes*.

Mary reminds us to look for God *all around us—especially among those whom we least expect to bear God’s promise of newness of life*. As Mary praises God, we are reminded that God brings *justice* to the world (often in unexpected ways) through *individuals and communities* whom most of our society ignores.

² Stephanie Paulsell, *Reading Toni Morrison in Advent*, The Christian Century, December 2, 2019

