

4th Sunday of Advent – 2021C

Christmas is all about seeing things differently. Breaking traditional images. Getting outside the box. Mary's visit to Elizabeth isn't just a meeting between two pregnant women. It's the introduction of a Messiah named Jesus to a prophet named John (Luke 1:39-45). The kick of an unborn child isn't simply a sign of fetal vitality. It's the muscle-flexing of John the Baptist, leaping for joy (v. 44). Mary's unplanned pregnancy isn't really a problem for her. It's a reason to rejoice in the great things God is doing (vv. 46-49). And the child that Mary is carrying: He'll be a mighty king but not a traditional one. Instead, he will be the Messiah God uses to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly (v. 52).

Christmas shatters our expectations and pushes us outside the box — including the beautifully decorated holiday box. It blows away our understandings of what usually happens when two women gather to support one another. It helps us see things differently — to see a hug between Mary and Elizabeth as a meeting between Jesus and John, a kick in the belly as a fist-bump of recognition, a song of praise as a celebration of God's ability to turn the world upside down.

Christmas turns us into iconoclasts. Yes, iconoclasts. "Image-breakers." That's what the word means, literally. To be an iconoclast is to be a person who attacks traditional images, ideas or institutions. We celebrate an Iconoclastic Christmas when we accept that God "has shown strength with his arm; he 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” (vv. 51-53). To celebrate an Iconoclastic Christmas is to worship an Iconoclastic God.

But image-breakers aren’t devoted to destruction, as violent as the word iconoclast might sound. In fact, the work they do is usually quite creative and constructive. Iconoclasts do what tradition-minded people say cannot be done, and they do it by seeing things differently, shatter traditions, and make contributions that are creative and constructive.

Which brings us to Mary and Elizabeth, who see things not for what they are but for what they might be. The conventional wisdom of the first century would trap these women in the box of second-class citizenship, with the extra constraint of shame placed on Mary, an unwed mother. But what does Elizabeth say when Mary greets her and John gives her a kick in the womb? “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,” she says. “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” (vv. 41-43). With the help of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth sees that God is breaking tradition and doing things differently, by sending the Lord Jesus into the world through a young girl named Mary.

Then there’s Mary, who, because of her knowledge of simple biology, is a total iconoclast when she believes the angel Gabriel about having a baby without a human father. That takes some thinking — or faith — that’s beyond the conventional. In our text,

however, Mary responds iconoclastically. Breaking into song, she exclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant” (vv. 46-48). She praises God for looking with favour on her, although she has done nothing to earn or deserve God’s attention. The gift of Jesus is a pure gift — all she has to do is accept it in faith and trust God to continue to work for good in her life.

“His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation,” she sings, going on to predict how God will turn the world upside down — scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, lifting up the lowly and feeding the hungry (vv. 50-53). She knows that God isn’t trapped by traditional ideas or institutions and that he will show favour to those who respect him — not to those who have the most earthly power or possessions.

That’s an image-breaker, for sure. Back in the first century, it was assumed that material wealth was a sign of God’s favour, while poverty signaled divine displeasure (Proverbs 14:11; 15:6). And, in truth, we do the same today, whether we practice prosperity theology or simply pass judgment on people who ask us for handouts. But Mary questions this, saying that God’s mercy is “for those who fear him” — not for those who have the biggest bank accounts.

Bringing her song to a big finish, Mary sings that this surprising work of God isn’t entirely unexpected. “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,” she belts out, “according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his

descendants forever” (vv. 54-55). God might appear to be a true iconoclast, to a world accustomed to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. But, in fact, God’s desire to turn the world upside down is grounded in “remembrance of his mercy” and “according to the promise he made to our ancestors.” The icons that God destroys are all earthly, not heavenly.

So, what could it mean for us to celebrate an iconoclastic Christmas? Let’s get creative and constructive, seeing things not for what they are but for what they might be. You know what we’ll see this Christmas: presents (both given and received), decorations (both understated and eye-popping), visits from family members and friends (both enjoyable and stressful). That’s the way it is. But Mary invites us to see things differently and to find true joy in a new place — in the gift of God’s favour.

God really loves us, and his affection has nothing to do with our education, our achievements, our job security, our bank account or our marital status. In fact, the surprising insight of Mary’s song is that God “has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant” (v. 48). She announces that God favours us in our lowliness, in our humility, in our simple willingness to lean on him.

That’s good news for all of us, especially in a year of economic turmoil, layoffs, investment losses, fear of covid 19 and personal instability. When the world around us doesn’t seem to care, God favours us. When the future seems uncertain, God promises to do great things for us. Mary announces that God’s “mercy is for those

who fear him from generation to generation” and that he will never let his people down.

That’s image-breaking, expectation-shattering, radically reassuring. And it also happens to be true. But that’s not all. According to Mary, an iconoclastic Christmas cannot be limited to new insights into our personal relationship with God. It also has to include participation in what God is doing in the world. This means signing up to work with Mary’s son, Jesus, to bring down the powerful from their thrones, lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things (vv. 52-53).

Mary’s words are a declaration from a voice at the bottom of society. It is a voice crying from the depths that God’s Messiah was finally bringing justice for the poor. It is a voice proclaiming a new order — an order centered on Mary’s son, the One who was coming to save his people from their sins.

So, part of our Christmas iconoclasm also has to involve taking our heads out of our holiday boxes and looking around. When the wrapping paper is cleaned up and the decorations are put away, we need to join Jesus in working for a better world, one in which the powerful are held accountable and the powerless are given support and opportunity. Each of us has a role to play, whether we’re expressing our values in the voting booth, helping a poor family find affordable housing, feeding the homeless or tutoring an immigrant in English and French.

Jesus wants us to know that we are favoured by God. But he also wants us to share that love and acceptance with others, by

reshaping our communities along the lines of God's new order, with opportunity and justice for all.

During this final week of Advent, we have the opportunity to move from a conventional Christmas to an iconoclastic Christmas. An iconoclastic Christmas is more than a season of benevolence toward the hungry and poor. It's a way of life, with specific actions year-round that assist the marginalized to embrace new opportunities and changes for themselves. The call to action is for us to be true iconoclasts of the church and to become doorkeepers who hold open the doors for people who are traditionally shut out.

Yes, Christmas is all about seeing what might be, instead of what is. That's what Elizabeth did when she welcomed an unwed mother with joy. That's what Mary did when she rejoiced in God's favour. That's what Jesus did when he entered the world to save us from our sins and bring justice to the poor. Let's join his movement, as Christmas iconoclasts.

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