

Luke 1:46-55

God in the Poor

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This month our worship theme is incarnation. That is a word which means in the flesh. When people use the word "Incarnation" at church, it refers to God's presence on earth. We Christians believe that God is not distant but here among us on earth- and even in human flesh. It used to be that the ancient Greeks thought that the gods sat in the clouds. Greek mythology tells of gods who sit in the clouds and make bets about the human interaction or watch people like folks at a celestial sports lounge share the action on a big screen television. That imagine of God sitting high in heaven is so engrained in the human psyche that over time, even Christians have assumed that God lives in the clouds.

In his famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo portrayed God floating in the clouds and extending a hand to Adam. Through that touch God sent the spark of life. Paintings like this one at the Vatican re-enforce the idea that God is above us and we have to look up to heaven to see God at all. Art influences our thinking and so most of us think that God sits on some heavenly throne we cannot see. God is completely and wholly separate from us and it takes great faith to cross the enormous divide between heaven and earth.

But here in the season of Advent we think about God's famous visit to Bethlehem. In this story God did not just touch a human finger across a great divide of time and space. God came to earth to live among the people of Israel. God was born like one of us, in a baby. God inhabited our flesh. God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. When you think about this story, it blows your mind because God has jumped out of heaven. God has leaped into our world in a new way. The birth of Jesus makes us wonder about this whole idea that God is aloof, and sitting on a cloud. If God came to Bethlehem, is it not possible that

God might come again? Are we right to look for God in heaven, or is God actually much closer than that. This Christmas story changes things - in our world- or worldview- forever.

Maybe God was not part of the Greek pantheon. Maybe God has never been content to gaze down at us from some lofty ethereal seat. God was not up there but right here. Jesus did not live as though God was in the clouds. He saw God in the people. He prayed as though God was in the next room. He bridged the gap between these realms with prayers like the one we said earlier- They will be done on earth as it is in heaven – no difference. Jesus talked to God so easily, that people started to wonder where God really was. Those questions have yet to be answered.

Where does God reside? What part of the universe is God's home base? Is it possible for us who follow Jesus to find God nearby? Where do we look to see God as Jesus did each day? These are not new questions, but they come to the surface every year at this time when we prepare for Christmas. This time of year people – even adults – start to wonder – if God was born in a manger is it possible that God is not in the clouds, or even on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Is it possible that if we hope to see God we will have to look in new places, or new ways?

If you were hoping to find answers today I am afraid this will be a disappointing sermon. I don't know how to tell you to see God. All I can do is give voice to the questions that incarnation raises. All I can do is to point in a direction of the Holy. Together we can do is squint into the mist, and make ourselves open to the possibility that by the very act of wonder- with grace, we may stumble onto holy ground.

Two weeks ago and Rev. Heike started this series saying that the incarnation is a mystery. Indeed, truer words were never spoken! Last week we explored the possibility that God is in the world. Today I want to explore a specific place where you can find God, or see God's face. That is among the poor.

The Bible says that God has a preference for the poor. Jesus seemed to share this preference. Indeed, Christ was at home with lepers, and prostitutes, with beggars and all the outcast of his time. But it was shocking to many of his followers that he spent so much time with the poor, and it has always been a stretch for us to believe that God is among the poor. I think it is hard for us to imagine because the poor are so unnerving. We often are tempted to think about the poor in ways that distance us from them. Sometimes whether we mean to or not when it comes to poor people most of us succumb to one of two temptations. Either we think less of poor people or we romanticize them. Both things are distortions, but I have done it; maybe you have too. It is hard to admit, but the most common temptation for us is to assume that poor people have earned their lot in life. They are poor because of something they did or didn't do. They are lazy or have poor judgment; They lack of initiative or engage in bad behavior. It is such a tempting distortion of reality because it helps us to feel pity or empathy or fear. If they don't deserve to be poor, then any of us might end up poor if we are not careful. That is a scary thought. You don't have to say these things out loud in public to think them.

The second temptation is just as bad as the first. If we manage to avoid reviling the poor, or blaming them for their plight, too often I think we romanticize poor people. We tell ourselves that they are happier; their lives are so much simpler without the burdens money brings. They are freer without an iPad or a BlackBerry. They avoid the pressured lifestyle we lead- bless their hearts. We idealize their lives – like living closer to the land is tantamount to camping all the time. Though we intend to be kind – at the end of the day romanticizing the poor is pretty patronizing.

One of the things I like about the movie – “Pay it Forward” is that it presents rich and poor people in human ways. It demonstrates the seamless way that we are all connected. Pay it Forward tells the story of a 12-year old boy named Trevor. Living in suburban Los Vegas, Trevor is inspired by an assignment from his 7th grade social studies teacher. The assignment is to come up with a plan to change

the world. Trevor devises a plan for people to do favors for others. It has to be a significant act of kindness. The deal is that you help 3 people but get nothing in return for your kindness. Instead you tell the people you help that they pay you back by helping 3 other people. You cannot pay the kindness back but you can pay it forward.

Trevor starts the project offering dinner and shelter to a homeless man. Trevor's mom gets home from work and is horrified to a homeless man sleeping in her car in the garage. She insists that he go the next morning, but he insists on fixing her car. He goes back to drugs, but he also manages to save a woman's life. The power of the film "Pay it Forward" is that it refuses to denigrate or romanticize people for their economic state- or income. The film demonstrates that strength and resilience knows no class or station. Humans struggle and prevail. We are all scarred and vulnerable at one time or another. Happiness knows no class; sadness falls like rain on the just and unjust.

In our scripture today, when Mary says – "My soul magnifies the Lord", she gives voice to the enormous sense of blessing on hearing the news that she will have a child destined for greatness. But her awe in this pregnancy is made sweet because she is poor. Mary comes to the table of life with so few expectations that when the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son who will be great, she is flabbergasted. When Gabriel tells her that Jesus will be the Son of the Most High, Mary is trembling with awe. What makes Mary great is that she is a person devoid of guile or hubris in this moment and so she recognizes a true miracle when she sees it. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. "What a miracle it would be if anyone even noticed me; now all generations shall call me blessed. God has passed over the powerful and lifted up a lowly person. Mary goes on to name God's preference for the poor. God has filled the hungry and sent the rich empty away.

I want to tell you the story of another young woman who came from poverty but whom many generations have called blessed. Born in Albania in 1910, Agnes Bojaxhiu felt the call to become a missionary nun at 18, and left home for India. She took the name Teresa and served as a teacher in a Roman Catholic school for girls in Calcutta. But Sr. Teresa was deeply troubled by the plight of the poor. In 1948 she believed God called her further. She gave up her habit, took a sari, stopped teaching and got medical training. She began to serve the destitute and starving in the slums. Without a source of income, Teresa was reduced to begging for supplies and shelter. In 1950 the Vatican allowed her to start the Sisters of Charity. In the next 60 decades the order grew from 13 nuns to well over 5000 nuns and monks who run orphanages, AIDS hospices, and charity centers worldwide. In 1997 – the year of her death, Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

But her diaries and letter reveal an odd disparity. When she was a young woman teaching in the convent school, she felt close to God when she prayed, or took the Eucharist. The oddest change and a source of great personal sorrow was the fact that throughout the 50 years of her work with the poorest of the poor, privately she experienced great doubt and struggle. She never again sensed God's presence in prayer or through the Eucharist. She wrote – "When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven there is such convicting emptiness, it is like knives in my soul." {Wikipedia – "Mother Teresa"} Throughout this period- more than half her life -when she never encountered God in the traditional Roman Catholic ways, Mother Teresa remained certain that God was working through her. No one knows why someone regarded as one of the world's best examples of living holiness should suffer such a prolonged dark night of the soul, but I wonder if the problem was not Mother Teresa but our theology. Clearly, God was there for her in the poor. But she did not have to look up to heaven or to a chapel ceiling to find God. Those depictions that inspired her as a young woman made no sense because she had matured, and like Jesus Christ, she found God in people. Mother Teresa always remarked that she felt God's presence in the

eyes of the suffering. I don't believe that God had abandoned her. She found God had skin on, and was all around her every day in children, and elderly, in AIDS patients and lepers.

Many of us have felt a worshipful grace when we have taken mission trip and work sponsored by this church. Last Tuesday I accompanied a group of Youth from this church who took a tour of the Elizabeth Stone House in Roxbury. The director and several social workers whom we met were people who had found a joy that defies logic except that they were fed by this work. It happens to us on church trips to help victims of Katrina, or serve at a soup kitchen in Boston. It happens when I went with the Youth mission trips to Mexico, or Philadelphia or Main. I know it happens to you when you go to see our friends in Sancta Maria Tzeja. Somehow God touches your spirit and you gain so much more than you give.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” (Luke 1: 46-47)