

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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Once Upon a Time: The Most Dangerous Season

Isaiah 61:1-11

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to
the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*

*Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall till your land and dress
your vines;
but you shall be called priests of the LORD,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.
Because their shame was double,*

Luke 1:46-55

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness
of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will
call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts*

*and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.*

*For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant
with them.*

*Their descendants shall be known among
the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD
has blessed.*

*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments
of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of
righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in
it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness
and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

*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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to
our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

I want to begin this morning with having us play a Christmas version of Name That Tune. I am going to play two pieces of music for you and first I want you to identify them and then we will have a vote as to which is the most appropriate Christmas music. Here is the first clip. (*play Handel's "For Unto Us a Child is Born" from the Messiah*). OK so what is the piece? Yes, that is correct it is Handel. So here is the second piece. (*play the opening theme to the movie Jaws*). OK, so what was that piece. Some of you got it immediately. It was indeed the opening theme to the movie Jaws; a movie so frightening that one of my friends, after having watched it, could not only not go back in the ocean for years, could not even take a bath for a year. Now comes the second part of our quiz. Which of these pieces of music is more appropriate for Christmas? Let me see a show of hands. For Handel...most of you. For the Jaws theme...not so many. Well what if I were to tell you that I think the Jaws theme fits better because Christmas is the most dangerous season of the year?

When I say that Christmas is the most dangerous season I am not referring to the fact that you might get pepper sprayed at Wal-Mart while you fight over the last discounted I-pad; or because you may have a coronary when you see your VISA bill in January. I believe it is the most dangerous season because of what Mary had to say upon becoming pregnant with the one who would save the world. I realize that for most of us Protestants this whole Mary thing seems a bit much, but she actually had a lot to say. We read the passage earlier this morning as it is usually read...through the lens of what the church, including John Calvin by the way, referred to as the Blessed Virgin, meek and mild. Now I want to read it again through the lens of a young woman who lives as a part of an oppressed people; who has been raised to believe that God will act on behalf of God's oppressed people just as God acted against the Egyptians in the Exodus. Let's hear it again. (*reread the passage with anger and power*).

Do you hear the difference? What Mary is proclaiming is that God takes down empires. Mary is proclaiming that God levels the playing field by taking down the rich, the powerful and the proud while lifting up the poor and powerless. Mary is doing this because this is what God does. God levels the playing field of humanity. This was the same point that Isaiah was making more than four hundred years earlier. Isaiah was anointed to tell the poor and powerless that God was going to level the playing field by taking the Babylonians down a peg or two; which is exactly what happened. Babylon was taken out by the Persians. Then the Persians when they became too proud were taken out by the Greeks. Then the Greeks when they became too proud were taken out by the Romans...and you get the picture. Mary proclaims that God has leveled the playing field in the past and is going to do it in the future...and this time God is going to do it through her son...which is why this is the most dangerous season of the year. Jesus is coming to level the playing field.

I understand that this idea may appear a bit foreign to many of us this morning; that God would be about leveling the playing field. Yet it is at the heart of this entire story (*the Biblical story*). We can find its roots referred to in our Isaiah text. The prophet speaks of proclaiming the "Year of the Lord's Favor." This Year of the Lord's Favor is the Jubilee year described in Leviticus. The Jubilee year was supposed to occur every 49 years...or once every generation. In that year all debts were cancelled. In that year all land that had been sold outside the family was to be returned to its original owners. Sounds pretty dangerous doesn't it? The purpose of this Year of the Lord's Favor was twofold. First it was a reminder that everything, meaning all land and goods belong to God and not to those who occupy them. Second it

was a way of insuring that everyone benefited from God's creation. God's intent for creation was never that a few have much and everyone else has little. The intent for creation was that there was enough for everyone and that at least once every generation the playing field was re-leveled and people had a chance to begin again.

What then are we to do with this? How are we, as those who have much, supposed to respond to Mary's proclamation that Christ came into the world to level the playing field? One way we might think about this is through another Once Upon a Time, but sort of real story; the story of the original St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was a real person. He served as a bishop in the Fourth Century in what we know as modern day Turkey. He was credited with several great miracles, only one of which I want us to remember today...and it is not the one about gifts and stockings. This miracle has to do with wheat. It begins with a famine in the area in which Nicholas served. One day at the local port he notices men loading grain aboard a ship which is headed for the capitol and the Emperor. Nicholas tries to convince the men to share their wheat. They are hesitant because they have weighed the wheat and unless the wheat weighs the same when it arrives at the capitol they will be in serious trouble. Nicholas prays about the situation and then tells the men that if they will trust him and God, and share the wheat, he will promise that the wheat will weigh the same when it arrives at the capitol. They agree, offload the wheat and head out on their journey. The wheat they offload is enough to feed Nicholas' people and provide seed grain for two more years. The wheat that arrives at the capitol...weighs the same. Nicholas was leveling the playing the field by insuring that the lowly had enough and were able for their needs and could share in the best that God's creation had to offer. He insured as well that the powerful shared what they had. His other miracles all pointed in the same direction.

Perhaps then our response to Mary's proclamation is to become those who, like Nicholas, work at leveling the playing field. In other words if we are to be followers of Mary's son, the one who came to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts; to bring down the powerful and raise up the lowly; to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty then maybe we need to be Christ's co-levelers. In a way we at First Presbyterian Church have made a good beginning of doing this. Many of you work for companies that provide people with a living wage at work and by so doing you are helping to level the playing field. Many of us work to help students in low performing public schools gain the skills they need to make it in this world. Others of us work with charter schools in other areas to insure low income students can make it in the world. As a congregation we fund the training to nursing students in Haiti that they might improve the health of their nation. Through deacons and individual efforts we support agencies such as Forgotten Harvest and Gleaners which make it possible for the hungry to eat. We also work with the Foster Care programs to help insure that every child has a loving family. These are but a few of the ways in which we together, are working to insure that all of God's people have the opportunity to share in the goodness of God's creation.

This is the most dangerous season of the year because it reminds us that Jesus came not just to save souls but to begin the great leveling process of humanity. This is the most dangerous season because it calls us to work alongside Christ as the levelers of the world; to risk what we have that all might participate and enjoy this amazing creation. The question for this week then is, "How am I, in the name of Christ, helping to level the playing field of this world?"