

God's Invitation to Prepare: Loving the Underdog
1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Luke 1:46-55
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First Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 (NRSV)

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Pre-Second Reading Comments

Before I read the New Testament scripture, here's some context. Mary is visiting her cousin Elizabeth, and she's pregnant. I wanted to understand her state of mind, so I asked the women in the Wednesday Bible study to describe what it's like to be pregnant since I've not been pregnant myself.

They said they felt so grateful, they felt nervous, they felt hopeful, they felt like there was an alien inside them. We decided together that Mary must have felt all of these things, PLUS all the feelings that come from being pregnant without being married in those days, PLUS all the feelings that come from still being a virgin while you're pregnant, PLUS all the feelings that come from knowing that the baby is the son of God. That's a lot of feelings!

Keep these feelings in mind as I read our passage, Luke 1:46-55. We often call it "The Magnificat."

Luke 1:46-55 (TNIV)

⁴⁶ *Mary responded,*

“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

⁴⁷ *How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!*

⁴⁸ *For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.*

⁴⁹ *For the Mighty One is holy,
and he has done great things for me.*

⁵⁰ *He shows mercy from generation to generation
to all who fear him.*

⁵¹ *His mighty arm has done tremendous things!
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.*

⁵² *He has brought down princes from their thrones
and exalted the humble.*

⁵³ *He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty hands.*

⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel
and remembered to be merciful.*

⁵⁵ *For he made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children forever.”*

Anyone else out there love the underdog?

The football bowl season started yesterday, with five bowl games with teams I have hardly heard of, let alone ones that I cheer for. So as I flipped the channels, I found myself cheering for the underdogs. Who wants the alpha dogs to win when we can have the joy of an upset?

It's the same way in pop culture. Whether it's the movie or Broadway show *Mean Girls*, where I root against the Plastics, or the movie *Erin Brockovich* where the lone crusader saves the day, I usually love the underdog. Harry

Potter, Alexander Hamilton, and the Jamaican Bobsled Team all have a place in my heart.

I think one reason they do is that I like to think about myself as an underdog—the high school nerd who somehow develops a personality along the way and ends up doing all right. Maybe you feel like an underdog sometimes, too.

Anyone else out there love the underdog?

When we turn to our passages from scripture today, we see God loves the underdogs, too. In our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul tells us,

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. (v. 27)

It's even clearer in Mary's song—the Magnificat:

God took notice of his lowly servant girl. (v. 48)

God has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. (v. 51-53)

God loves the underdogs! He's mindful of how far they are down on the totem pole. What's more, he's scattering the alpha dogs...he's bringing those on the top down from their thrones in order to lift up the ones on the bottom. He has filled the losers up with good things, but has sent the winners away empty.

God's all about the underdogs—Mary proves it. After all, God could have picked any number of upper-class women to give birth to his son. Jesus could

have been born to the wife of Caesar Augustus, or maybe Herod's favorite daughter. It wouldn't have even had to have been that extravagant—he could have simply chosen someone who actually had a room to give birth in, rather than heading out to a stable, in the midst of the animals. Mary was a full-on underdog—but she's full of joy because God has reached out to her.

Her son was an underdog too. Jesus could have come rich and powerful and well-connected, but instead he was born in a manger, poor and disempowered.

So this passage from Luke, it's good news, right? It's good news that God loves the underdogs—that God pulls down the princes and lifts up the humble. It's good news, because love the underdogs—it's good news because maybe we identify with the underdogs. So the Magnificat is good news, right?

Well, it's good news, as long as you're an underdog. It isn't quite as awesome if you're on top of society. After all, it's a lot more fun to be joyful with Mary, singing about how awesome it is to be on the bottom looking up at how God is making things right, than it is to be on top, waiting for God to humble you.

And for most of us who are here listening to this sermon, the problem is that we're not really underdogs. We might feel like underdogs, we might identify with underdogs, we might love underdogs. But by most of the measures of society, we're not underdogs. Of course, there are some exceptions. But most of us are at the top of society by most measures.

Education. Income. Wealth. Community leadership. Social Capital. Race.

We're not underdogs, most of us. And that's not even comparing ourselves to others throughout the world, where the advantages most of us enjoy are even more significant.

So what do we do with this news that God will bring the mighty like us down from our thrones? How do we prepare for Christ's coming? Is this song from Mary simply bad news for us?

Do we just ignore it, and hope that God isn't really serious with all this preference for the underdogs? Do we give away everything we have, hoping to convert ourselves from alpha dogs to somehow become underdogs, as if we didn't already have the jobs and the education and the income?

What do we do when we're forced to take a hard look in the mirror, and admit that there's an inconsistency between all of our resources, and God's love for the underdog in our passages today?

I think the answer is hidden right in the very middle of Mary's song:

God shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. (v. 50)

As it turns out, it's not all about being a underdog, or being an alpha dog. It's more complicated. God's not simply all about the poor, to the exclusion of the rich. Instead, God's all about those who fear him, from generation to generation. "Fear" in this sense is more like worship, or honor, or hold in awe. So God's all about those who worship him—those who honor him—those who hold him in awe.

The good news of the gospel is that God loves the weak who fear him...and that God loves the powerful who fear him. God loves it whenever anyone

fears him. And one way we on the top show we fear God is to join in God's love for the poor and the powerless. We don't work to maintain our advantages and our top spots on the social hierarchy. Instead, we follow Christ's lead and do ministry among the underdogs...supporting them and loving them. When we do this, the whole world can be filled with joy.

I got a glimpse into this joy at a meal a few years ago at the church in central Illinois where I served. The meal brought together the business and community leaders who met there for Rotary each week, and the developmentally-delayed clients of a day-center that we hosted at the church. There were more than a hundred disabled adults and their caregivers, plus dozens of Rotarians serving them. Seeing everyone together gave us a chance to see what happens when the top and bottom of society comes together.

The best part of the event came when a jazz quartet was singing and playing, and one of the developmentally-delayed adults that I'll call Judy approached them. Judy struggles to communicate, but she doesn't struggle to sing. She grabbed the mic and started skatting, punctuating her riffs with shouts of joy. She can barely speak, but her joy came through as she said one word: "boogie." And boogie Judy did—up on the stage. All by herself. To the utter delight of everyone there with her.

And while Judy boogied, she reminded me what can happen when the alpha-dogs reach out to the underdogs. She reminded me that the result can be joy—not just because the humble get lifted up, or because the proud bow down.

There can be joy because all of us—no matter how high we are, or how low we are---all of us get a glimpse of a world that God longs for us to experience...a world where saviors are born in mangers to poor teenage mothers, where the powerful serve the weak, and where God extends mercy to

the underdogs, and mercy to the alpha dogs, and mercy to all those who fear him.

I want to close my sermon with a prayer that was read at the Christmas Tea—it's a prayer that the late President George H W Bush offered as his first act as President. As we pray it together, listen for how it guides those of us at the top of society:

Heavenly Father, ...Make us strong to do your work...and write on our hearts these words: "Use power to help people." For we know that we are given power, not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us to remember it Lord, Amen.