

The Change All Around Us

Luke 1:46-56

Psalm 146:5-10

I would like us to note that the ancient carved valley around us was once a glacier, and was once I believe an ancient sea.

That the forests around us were not all pine.

The the earth tilted and the sun rose, and people spoke languages we do not know
But still they worried about their crops
And they tended their children
And at night they told their stories.

Testimony is that ancient cultures were sophisticated,
That they prized knowledge even though it could not be written down
They told long epic tales
And write down their families stories.

And all of this, all of it is now gone
Replaced by our community
With our stories and our hopes and dreams.

I have been reading recently a fascinating book called the "Dawn of Everything" which tells the stories of ancient cultures from North America, to Turkey to France to Egypt,
And the way that cultures chose different modes of being
The way that they learned to be wise
The way that if the culture next to you practised agriculture, then you would remain a hunter gatherer
Or the way that if the culture next to you kept slaves, then you would avoid slaves
Or if they had kings, you would avoid hierarchy
There has been so much change, so much choice,
For 1,000s and 1,000s of years

This story might point to change as a constant, an evolution,
But sometimes change is about a reversal, a turning, a move of God into the field of history,
To bring justice, and to lift up the oppressed and the bring down the powerful on their thrones.

Mary sings about this,

In the past tense, partly because she is so sure, that she knows it and that God will come again
And partly because it has happened in the past,
Because that is what God does.

*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 of their hearts
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
He has lifted up the lowly
He has filled the hungry with good things
And sent the rich away empty.*

Do you notice this great reversal, or the way that Isaiah sees it in Isaiah 35, which is one of the set readings for this Sunday...

*The desert shall rejoice and blossom
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened
And the ears of the deaf unstopped
Then the lame shall leap like a deer*

Or from Psalm 146 which was our reading

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob
Whose hope is in the Lord their God
Who made heaven and earth
The sea and all that is in them
Who keeps faith forever*

*Who executes justice for the oppressed
Who gives food to the hungry*

*The Lord sets the prisoner free
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down
The Lord loves the righteous*

Or when Jesus speaks of his ministry to John the Baptist

*Go and tell John what you hear and see
The blind receive their sight
The lame walk
The lepers are cleansed
The deaf hear
The dead are raised
The poor have good news preached to them*

This is the sign that God has been at work for John...
How do I know God has been at work - because strange reversals have been happening
The world is not as it used to be
It has moved in the direction of goodness, of hearing, of seeing, of even the dead being raised
These are things that cannot happen by ordinary human intervention
They require the move of God.

I am often struck by the way that these oracles move between the past and present and future
tense
Mary says he has done this - and this has often been a sign that God has already done it, so surely
that she can even speak of it in the past, but I think also she means the past.

We know that Mary came from a group of the very poorest people
Those called the Anawim,
The poor ones
And these were people who in their poverty and loss had learned to look for the movement of
God
Mary knew the stories for the future, but she also knew them for the past
And in every generation
And I love that idea, that God is involved in a constant drama of movement and of change,
Of transformation and change,
That Mary does say
*His mercy is for those who fear him
From generation to generation*

I want to dwell on that this morning
That from generation to generation
God is doing the thing that Mary, and Isaiah and Jesus and the psalmist speak of,
These great reversals, transformations for good.
From generation to generation.

The Dawn of Everything

I have recently been reading a fascinating book of Anthropology called the Dawn of Everything
It's about the history of ancient societies,
And refutes the myth that we are all on one incessant conveyor belt of progress
That we were once hunter gatherers
And then sometime in Mesopotamia about 10,000 years ago,
Someone discovered farming
And this pulled us into back breaking work, and into a world in which we were dominated
And that this idea spread from Mesopotamia into Europe
Creating ever more prosperous societies and ever more hierarchies
And then about 500 years ago we discovered education,
And became yet more sophisticated still.

It's a very linear and a very arrogant view of history
Which sees an inexorable line of progress
And ourselves the pinnacle of human achievement
Arriving here just in time to destroy ourselves through overheating and over consumption.

The good news is that the truth is far far more sophisticated and different than that
Societies for many thousands of years intentionally opted not to farm
That vast trade networks roamed across North America for example,
And huge cities were built, perhaps for a 1,000 years and then change again
And that people were clever and educated.

There are accounts of American Native peoples first encountering the French who came from
Europe
And being amazed at how uninformed they were
And how poor they were at handling themselves in discussion and argument
As opposed to their sophisticated thinking.

And these societies were going for 1,000 of years
And I think of Mary's reflection
That God is at work
Showing mercy to those who fear him
From generation to generation
This is what God does, all the time,
This is how you know God is present, the great reversals are happening
The deaf hear
The blind see
The captive is set free.

And I think of our own nation

Our land actually began life south of the Equator

In an ancient land complex called Laurentia, the vast bulk of which would become North America
We floated off, and then bumped into England and then Europe

For many years we were covered in snow and ice.

There is no evidence that the Neanderthals managed to make it here.

The first settlers to Scotland came at least 12,000 years ago,

Think of that,

That's 12 times the distance between us and William the Conqueror

Think of all the stories in that time

And God at work

From generation to generation

Letting his mercy being known.

That settlement of 12,000 years is in Howburn Farm, near Elsrickly in South Lanarkshire

The next settlement is of 8,000 years old

So 4,000 years of which we know nothing

That's in Cramond, so it took 4,000 years of work to get from South Lanarkshire to Edinburgh

Then 3,500 year ago, there were settlements found in South Uist and of course Skara Brae in
Orkney

And in all these

From generation to generation

His mercy is shown

He is making these great reversals

That only God can do, from generation to generation,

The blind seeing

The deaf hearing

The captive set free.

The Crannogs on Loch Tay are 2,500 years old, so by the time Mary was singing, there was
someone in Perthshire on a 500 year old Crannog, thinking that things never changing

Except he probably wasn't thinking that because I wonder if he knew

That God was at work

And where God is at work

The deaf hear

The blind see

The captive is set free

Do you see these great waves

And they are still

These great transformations

And Advent is a time to tune with these

To tune with the changes of God

Which are always in the right direction

And God is good at this

Doing this in the past, the present and the future.

Mary knows this,

She knows what she is a part of.

And I pray this for our nation

That we be more just

Our world that we be lovers of the peace

That somehow God will hold on to all of this.

And we are called to be agents of change

Agents of renewal

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Spoke movingly for me of the kind of change that we need

In painful suffering

As if it must enter the very muscle, the sinew must be parted

That this must go to the marrow,

That the change of God is a piercing, upsetting thing,

Which means movements in the dark...

De Chardin prayed

"In all these dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance."

And I wonder where is this for us

Where is the movement of God

Where do we sing with Mary

Even though this will cost us and part us and change us

Where is the move of God

To transform

To make this world

More just

More loving

More healed

More beautiful

His mercy is on those who fear him

From generation to generation

He has shown strength with his arm.

AMEN