

# Sermon Text for December 17, 2023

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Isaiah 61:1-4 and Luke 1:46-55*

*“A teenager’s gratitude”*

A week away. I can’t help but think of all of the different places where the Bronkema family has celebrated Christmas as this year we will be celebrating it in a way that we never have before. Growing up in Rome, Italy we felt fortunate because we had two Christmases. As a family we would celebrate on December 25 as we are used to here in this country. But then we would also celebrate it on January 6 when La Befana came around to my Italian friends and brought gifts, so we double dipped when we were growing up. In Ventnor we went back to our traditional way of doing Christmas, and we all have our family traditions, ours was that starting with the oldest in the family they would choose a present from under the tree that was not theirs, and give it to whomever it was and everyone would watch that person open their present. Then the next oldest and all the way through the six of us in the family. It took a lot of patience waiting until you got a gift and finally were able to open it up. We did that at home with our girls as well.

When we moved to Russia with our girls it was very different. You couldn’t find a tree until around the third week in December, so we decided to get an artificial tree for the first time in our life and we had it for five years in Moscow. The reason was that December 25 wasn’t really recognized culturally. No one really celebrated Christmas on that day. I remember getting in the worst traffic jam of my life on Christmas Day, a day that here normally there are zero cars on the road, as we tried to travel from the US Embassy to the Indonesian Embassy where I had responsibilities at both. The big day in Russia is January 1<sup>st</sup> because there was no religious affiliation to that day, just the beginning of a new year. The church has become more powerful over the last 13 years so maybe things have changed, but Christmas in Russia wasn’t even noticed by the people.

This year on Christmas morning Stacy and I are flying out to Seattle to be with all of our girls and all of Stacy’s family. First time we have ever been by ourselves on Christmas Eve. Well, we aren’t by ourselves, we are with you, but it is a very, very different Christmas for us this year than we have ever had. There are so many things that we take for granted when Christmas rolls around.

We find our Advent in the Gospels reading in Luke Mary who is a young teenager, maybe 13 or 14 who is bewildered by her pregnancy and decides to go see her cousin and spends

three months with her, this older cousin Elizabeth who is equally bewildered by her own pregnancy. Christmas is the story of the reversal of human assumptions redirected to the will of God. The way that you think the world works, we find in Christmas, is not the way that God wants it to work and is not the way that God works. We are going to understand God's desires more closely today that will lead us to a place where we will follow him more closely.

Christmas reveals to us God's preference for those who are poor, on the fringes of society, that we have turned our back on. Hopefully we will be able to redirect our own way of life to lift up God's way of life which is in direct contrast to the way of life that we have assumed through the world. Let's read.

## **READ**

There are a lot of choices on streaming platforms on series that focus on the uber wealthy and ways in which they live. It kinda normalizes that way of life and is probably meant to create in the viewers a desire to live that way. As you watch *Billions*, or *Succession*, or even the *Crown*, which is a series that Stacy and I enjoy watching, you see a lifestyle that is unrealistic and yet portrayed as one that the viewer, you would assume, would like. The wealth and the favor, and the power, and the privileges that come with that lifestyle the viewer, you would like, would be more than happy to sign up for.

This perspective is in direct contrast to what we read in Isaiah, actually in all of Scripture, where we read that these cultural expectations and desires that are focused on wealth and power are actually turned on their head in God's approach. From the very beginning of our reading we see in vs.1 a very clear preference to the oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners in our prison system, those who mourn. It sounds a lot like our Sermon on the Mount and the beatitudes where Jesus says those who are blessed are those whom none of us would want to be: the poor, the faint of heart. But here, and in the beatitudes and throughout all of Scripture God says: these are my people.

If these are God's people, then those people that we see on these series, and the way in which we think society and culture works: those with the power get to call the shots and make the rules, those with wealth get to dictate how things are run, those who have the resources get to choose what is given out and to whom. Scripture tells us something different. That in God's playbook everything we expected, the way that we think the world works, is not the way that God is working behind the scenes to make things happen.

Isaiah's promise to the Israelites who are the ones who are being downtrodden by the hostile nations around them in this Scripture, is that there will be a complete reversal of what we

understand is the way of the world in society and culture when the people of God start to live and understand God's preference for the poor and the powerless and those without voice.

Jesus is reflected in all of that which we read in Isaiah. The poor, the prisoner, the illegal immigrant. Who is least in our society and culture, who is not seen like the unwed teen Mary? Christmas is the story more about turning things upside down than it is about keeping things the way they are and even less about going back to the way things used to be. That is not God's desire.

In Luke we read Mary's teenage proclamation about gratitude. It comes at a curious time in her life. She has just been visited by the angel of God telling her that she is pregnant. She responds to this news in vs.38 by laying her life down to God and saying: I am your servant, however this plays out, I trust as you say that all things are possible with God. She then goes to her cousin, Elizabeth, her older cousin, for a visit.

We should see in Isaiah 61 a Scripture to which Mary could identify directly. She saw herself as the one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord had descended, well, because He had, literally and physically. She was pregnant by the work of the Holy Spirit. She clearly saw herself as one who was anointed by God, because she was. So she gives thanks in what we call today the Magnificat. This term comes from the first words of the Scripture, My soul magnifies the Lord, comes from the Greek megalune, which means to make great, to amplify.

As you follow along with this song that she sings you can find that each verse reflects a different Old Testament Scripture, so she literally is quoting Scripture each verse along the way. Let me tell you them in case you want to look them up: vs 46 is from I Samuel 2, 47 – Psalm 25, 48 – Psalm 113, 49 – Psalm 111, vs. 50 – Psalm 103, vs. 51 – Psalm 89 – 52 – I Samuel 2 and so on.

Like Isaiah 41 this is a song of God putting things on their heads because she as an unwed teenager was the least on culture or society who would be expected to be carrying the salvation of the world in her body. She was a nobody, an unseen, the rules were written to ensure that she had no say and no influence on how things are doing around here. This song is very, very similar to the song that Hannah sings in I Samuel 2 where she celebrates the fact that God had heard her plea and that she is pregnant with a child as well. All of this is about God taking that which we assume in society and culture, that the way things are is the way they ought to be, and he says, no, not in my kingdom.

There is such a difference between that which we take for granted and the way we see them around us, and the way that Scripture describes God's desire and God's heart. A teenager

is chosen to carry and bear the Savior of the world. A child shall lead us to a better understanding of the kingdom of God. Unless we become like children we will never understand how God is working in our world. The shepherds, the lowest of the low, are the first to experience God first hand in person. The lepers are touched by God and healed. The thieves are given promises of eternal life. The poor receive an inheritance from God far more valuable than any earthly treasure. What we think and what we expect in culture and in our society is the opposite of the way that God works.

The warning to us in these Scriptures is that we don't have the right to identify with Mary because we have the resources, we have historically been the ones to call the shots, we aren't the outcast and those on the fringes of society. The more we fight for certain things that we think belong to us, the more we will be fighting against God.

This Christmas and this Advent since we aren't quite there yet, know that God's priority is to establish his kingdom, not to consolidate the advantages and the power that we think ought to be in our hands. A teenagers gratitude that we read today, reflects the reality that God has established here on earth which is the opposite from what we currently see people striving after here on earth.

God has a history of helping his people. He does it by turning things upside down from what we are used to. It is our job not to fight these reversals, to not try to keep the status quo moving forward which takes us further from God. Those who don't fear the Lord aren't able to perceive or see or understand or benefit from the mercy of God. It is there for them, but they simply are not able to receive it. Instead, like Mary, our job is to say here I am, your servant, use me for your purposes. Amen.