

WHO SEES THE WORLD FOR YOU?



Luke 12:38 "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.'"

Who imagines the world for you? That was a question that one of my seminary professors once asked us to pay attention to in our ministry. Who sees the world for us? Through whose eyes did we imagine our lives, define our values, or envision our future? Whose voice do we hear in the silence of the night? For all manner of words are being shouted at us these days in the name of Christianity. Whom do we listen to?

The president of the evangelical Liberty University in Virginia is urging his students to arm themselves in the classroom to deal with "those Muslims.". A Texas pastor in a recent sermon called for the execution of homosexuals in this

country. An Illinois professor at Wheaton College was disciplined for saying that we worship the "same God" as the Muslims do and for wearing a head scarf, which she did as an act of Advent devotion in solidarity with them. The word and the name of God are being brandished about these days as a weapon by a sometimes-frightened people who want to preserve their way of life for themselves alone.

Meanwhile a young Jewish girl, an unwed mother named Mary, from a poor little village in the hill country of Galilee, had a much different view of what God wanted. In echoes of an earlier song by Hannah, recorded in the First Book of Samuel, when God gave Elkinah's wife a son after many years of barrenness, Mary spoke from the "lowliness of a servant of God," not the pompous pretentiousness of a powerful preacher or the endless whining of religious partisans.

Mary sang of magnifying God, of rejoicing in God, because God had blessed her with the promise of a son. She extolled God as one whose "strength . . . scattered the proud," "brought down the powerful," and "lifted up the lowly." Her God fed the hungry and "sent the rich away empty."

In other words, her God had no desire to make the powerful more powerful, or to protect the wealth of the wealthy, or to feed those who were already well-fed. In a divine irony that Christians have rarely wanted to grasp, Mary's God sided with the least and the lowliest, with the poor and the humbled, with

the sinner and the outcast -- which is exactly what Jesus did as well in his brief ministry, and what we Christians perhaps ought to be doing in our own lives.

Instead of arming ourselves to protect our privileges, we prosperous Americans ought to be extending our grace and mercy to others less fortunate than us. Instead of demeaning the lives of others in order to shield our preferred lifestyles, we ought to be setting captives free and standing with the oppressed and rejected, and welcoming the refugees on our shores with open arms, remembering that the Holy Family once themselves had to flee from government violence in Bethlehem and lived as refugees in a foreign land for a time, in Egypt. Instead of demanding safety to ease our own personal fears, we should be digging deep in our trust in God, for the bravery and the willingness to step out into a dangerous world, as Jesus did, to care for one another, especially for the widow and orphan, who have none to care for them, to break down social barriers, and cross cultural lines, even if such actions risk the wrath of the rich and powerful.

Instead of preening, parading, and displaying our excellent taste at this time of year in all things musical, liturgical, and ecclesiastical, we ought to be giving ourselves away, as Hannah gave her son Samuel to the Lord and as Mary gave her son Jesus to the world, we ought to be getting down and dirty with the lowly and the lonely, who sleep on our church steps, wait in

long lines at our food pantries, and who sometimes even wander into our services.

Not long ago, I read in the New York Times how certain hedge-fund owners were preparing their escape-America plans, in case the nation that has made their wealth possible decides to tax them more fairly.

So, who imagines the world for us? I know for sure that Mary had a vision of God very different from many Christians. Mary's God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imaginations 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. Echoing beliefs long held in Judaism, Mary sang of a divine reversal: scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, sending the wealthy away with nothing.

But unfortunately, exactly the opposite though has happened. The proud stand with each other as a united phalanx to deprive and denigrate others. They create social systems and tax structures that reward their pretensions. They create redoubts to protect their privilege, from castles to gated communities, from elite universities to private clubs. They resist the very scattering that is God's desire, according to Mary.

The powerful cling to their thrones, and almost every social institution, from religion to law and especially

politics, joins in protecting the claims of the rich. The current American legal system, for example, like the churches perhaps, is far more solicitous of the wealthy than of anyone else.

The lowly, in turn, are being grounded down -- today as much as in the slavery and serfdom of yesterday -- and even religion hesitates to raise them up, lest doing so offend some of our big givers. The middle class is slowly disappearing in this country. The hungry are fed now and then, but by a *noblesse oblige* attitude that makes the poor feel dependent and dishonored, while the rich live large.

So, what will God do with a people that does exactly the opposite of what Mary says God desires? I think God may have gotten tired of working through churches and has found them so often unwilling to help. I think God has sent us prophets and saints, whom we have memorialized in marble, rather than followed as leaders. I am increasingly fearful that God may have finally had it with us. God will do what God will do, whether or not we go along, say many. Our former Bishop believes the Prayerbook has got it wrong, that the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God through Christ Jesus is NOT the Mission of the Church, for *that*, he says, is the Mission of God, and that God will continue that Mission whether the Church joins him or not. Perhaps we should spend more time at this season following the example of our Lord and the vision of Mary in the

true spirit of Christmas, and less time fretting about our family celebrations and our church traditions. Amen.