

# *The Upside Down Gospel According to Mary*

Sunday 14 December 2014

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

Luke 1:46b-55

Peter JB Carman

## I.

I saw them there hunkered down in the hot roadway, broad woven hats, women laying pavement, women working stone, laboring as they have for generations, building roadways by hand for the armies of the powerful, highways for the commerce of the nation. This was Burma, the year 1995.

It wasn't till we got closer, stepped out into the road, that I saw soldiers standing idly by, armed with batons, to make sure that no one left.. "These women are volunteers," our official guide told us blandly as he introduced us to the women. "They are doing their national service." I was puzzled, upset by what I saw, thirteen year old women, thirty year old women, seventy year old women, there in the road. "Why the soldiers?" I asked, "If they are volunteers, why guards?" His lips smiled, but his eyes had a funny look in them, unsmilingly instructing to listen carefully for his second official lie. "The soldiers are volunteers, too." We both knew that wasn't true. The same guide at great risk would later take us racing past the prison where political prisoners were held, even encouraging photos out the window of a fast-moving van. Beneath the roar of the motor, he could tell the truth.

The story looks different, from the underside of history. Official history always belongs to the victor. It sings the ballads of the mighty, not the broken tunes of the losers. The song from the underside tends at best to be filed somewhere deep in the recesses of our collective memory. And yet History from the top is not to be confused with truth. Official stories and myths are not to be confused with God's honest understanding.

One of the extraordinary things about the New Testament is that it contains the story of little people, not only those of the rich and famous. It is full of little details that the official historians are uninterested in, at best. But thanks to Luke's Gospel, we have a glimpse of that view: the upside down view from Mary's angle.

## II.

Some day she will be known as the mother of Jesus, but as of yet she is unknown; an obscure young woman who is pregnant. Mary goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, in the country of Judea.

In the moments when they meet, both of them understand intuitively that Mary is carrying within her something more than a child. She is carrying the future. She is carrying hope.

Mary, the young girl, Mary betrothed but not yet wed: Mary sings, or says or shouts the words which Luke's gospel captures so beautifully in verse. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.... Henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for One who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is God's name..." Mary knows in her soul that she is being called to a special purpose. A God who is able to turn the world upside down, One who can reverse the fortunes of the vanquished and lift up those who are invisible: that's who is calling her. "...God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, and put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree."

Mary understands that within her she carries someone who represents hope for a people who have hit bottom! Occupied by foreign forces, used and abused for the gain of a small and wealthy group of people, her people have been losing their sense of who they are and whose they are...this land desperately needs hope. It needs deliverance. And now, in keeping with the prophets of old, one of those who was downtrodden is to be made their deliverer...

In the days when we find Mary speaking her words of promise, she is one not considered qualified to speak at all, about matters of faith, or about matters of the world. In the first place she is a woman. In the world in which she lives, both Jewish and Gentile women-- particularly young unmarried women-- are not normally expected to speak out on matters of faith-- certainly not in an authoritative way. In the second place, Mary is poor. In the third place, she is pregnant and single.

The princes and the religious establishments of the ancient world didn't much care what poor women said to each other, up in the hill country or anywhere else. History just wasn't interested in what people like Mary had to say. Much of the time, it still isn't!

But here, in the Gospel of Luke, we have a record or at least a memory: an extraordinary story of an ordinary young woman that causes the whole world to stop and listen. Mary, singing the downside up. Mary giving a history lesson, prophesying to all the would-be experts, the priests and the prophets, the pastors and the pundits. Mary, giving a lesson on the nature of what real power is, to the politicians, the preachers, the princes.

### III.

Isn't it strange? Even with the Gospel of Luke in easy reach, many of us grow up thinking of Mary dressed in blue, Mary silent, Mary in holy adoration, Mary meek and mild. Our conventional narrative turns a fire and brimstone prophet, a preacher woman of God's revolution, into a soft vision with a halo of gold. But this is no silent Mary, not in Luke's gospel.

Having trouble picturing this Mary? Remember the mothers of the disappeared; think raging grannies and remember. Remember in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women in this country working for the abolition of slavery, and ready to be chained for the right to vote. Remember Sojourner Truth and Susan B. Anthony. And then think back almost sixty years: remember Claudette Colvin, a black teenager arrested for refusing to move to the back of the bus nine months before Rosa Parks. Civil Rights leaders were reluctant to publicize her efforts: She had become pregnant

while unmarried and a teenager. Can you picture Mary yet? Think Malala Yousafzai, a girl who has refused to quit advocating for the rights of young girls to equal education—even after they tried to kill her. Malala, the world’s youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

I can almost hear this Mary laughing: laughing with joy at the certainty of God’s overwhelming victory over the history writers and the rulers and the oppressors of her land.... Laughing with joy at the promise she carries in her belly and in her bones. Laughing with joy at surprising news about history, from the bottom up. Laughing with joy at the surprising good news of the day when it isn’t her fate anymore, when it isn’t her granddaughter’s fate anymore, to build the highways for the generals, to live and work and die beneath the blazing sun of injustice anymore.

#### IV.

Sometimes, we get discouraged. It’s been a couple of millennia plus a few years since Mary started shouting and singing. Some days it is hard to see much evidence that the Mary vision of God turning the world around has gotten very far. The dynamics in our nation are mirrored, reflected and magnified around the globe. Wealth and power, prestige and might still make right. Sometimes it looks as though the gap between rich and poor, powerful and weak, men and women and so many gaps between us—the gaps are becoming wider, not narrower.

And yet she’s still singing, singing the downside up, the gospel according to Mary. The rational view, I suppose, would be that Mary was wrong in her predictions. God didn’t scatter the proud in the imagination of their stony hearts. It might be most reasonable to give up on Mary’s revisionist approach to cruel history.

But Mary’s view, Mary’s song, Mary’s shout, is so refreshing, so faithful to the living God we know down deep inside -- we better stick to the unreasonable view. Better to sing her song! Because even defeat with that song on our lips and in our hearts, losing with her courage in us—in the end that’s better than winning all the rest. It’s better than victory at the cost of our souls.

Mary’s bones long ago turned to dust. The child she carried in her was born, one day to be nailed to a tree. And from generation to generation after her, those who have sung out, spoken out, cried out for a new world, have been hammered down into the dust with her. But her song will not be silenced. And their songs will not be silenced.

History may make a lousy judge, but God does not forget, God does not buy the sanitized version. Our judge ultimately, is not the history books. Our judge is God alone. Our hope is in a God who will not be kept hidden in houses of stone and wood, but a God who gets around, who sees what’s really happening. This is a God who does not scorn to visit slaves pounding stone. This is a God more compassionate and more just than any nation’s storytellers. God will hear the songs turned downside up, and the ballads of the broken. God will hear the whispers of the little people....her story as well as his story.

## V.

Mary, Mary, you had a baby. Some call him King Jesus. Pretty strange king. He never had anything, had no home to call his own. Had no court—he spoke from under trees, he wandered in the hills and showed up on the edge of town. He had no power. On the cross, he forgave his enemies. And in his weakness, in his vulnerability, even in his harshest words, he had more love, a new kind of power greater than any one has ever seen.

Still we're waiting. Still we are struggling, knowing that it probably won't make the papers, won't be remembered. Still the story is being written from the top down. But some day, it won't be that way any more. And today sometimes a young girl speaks out, sometimes ten or a thousand or ten thousand will gather in the streets to condemn the violence against women that remains all too prevalent, point to a new reality.

Someday, we will have sung the downside up and the upside down and in the place of mountains of greed and valleys of despair there will be a new mountain, a mountain of justice and love. Mary, some day your manifesto will be the charter of rights and freedom for all of humankind.

And on that day we will meet you: and we will laugh aloud with you. And together we will process up that mountain of God, with that ancient prophet Isaiah, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."