

“Pick a Side”  
Luke 1:46b – 55; Matthew 11:2-6

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As we’ve said, today is the third Sunday of Advent. If you’ve been following along with us these last two Sundays, you may be asking, “When are we going to get to Baby Jesus? When are we going to get to the manger and shepherds and Wise Men?”

Hang in there, they’re coming. We’ll get there. But first, we have to learn something about Jesus and why Jesus matters. We have to know why we’re making a such big deal about someone being born some 2000 years ago.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we learned Jesus is not a one-and-done. Jesus will come again. Because of Jesus, then, our faith is forward looking. Our faith is built on past events, certainly, but our faith also has a forward orientation. We are constantly looking to the future. Jesus’ birth matters, but it’s not the end of the story.

On the second Sunday of Advent, we learned about God’s Peaceable, Fruitful Kingdom. We learned if we want to live in God’s Kingdom on earth today, we need to live those fruits of the Spirit we talked about. And – we need to get on with it. It’s urgent. The axe is lying at the root of the tree. It’s time to bear good fruit.

Today, we learn more about the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven. We learn more about how God wants us to live. Jesus shares what we need to do if we want to live in the Peaceable, Fruitful Kingdom now.

In our Matthew text, Jesus lays out who God cares about. In the Kingdom of Heaven, the mean and cruel are not celebrated. The powerful are not worshipped. In the Kingdom of Heaven, beautiful people do not get to go first. The rich are not given hints on how to cheat on their taxes. These are not God’s concerns.

Jesus tells us God’s concern is for the blind, the lame, the deaf, the poor. God’s concern, in other words, is for people who are suffering, in pain, powerless. God’s concern is for those who do not have the wherewithal to help themselves.

Now please understand. I'm not disparaging anyone. All of us middle-class folks need Jesus, too. God loves us, for sure and for certain. But in the Kingdom of God, both in heaven and on earth, there is special concern for the powerless, the suffering, those in pain. Those who do not have the wherewithal to help themselves.

OK. We can all go along with that. Nothing too upsetting.

But what about verse six? Who would be offended, who would stumble over, Jesus giving sight to the blind and bringing good news to the poor? Who would be scandalized by that?

Have you ever heard anyone say, or maybe you've said it yourself, "If those people would stop having so many children. If you had taken care of your body instead of abusing it. If you had stuck with the job instead of quitting. If they had studied harder in school. I pulled myself up by my bootstraps. Why can't they? If they would just break their addictions. (Like quitting cold-turkey is easy.) If those people would just learn to speak English." (By the way, if you've never tried to learn a foreign language as an adult trust me, it's harder than it looks.)

Have you ever heard anyone talk that way? Did they sound like they might be offended by what Jesus is saying?

Uh, oh. Anyone who berates the foreigner, the refugee, the stranger; anyone who looks down on the impoverished; anyone who makes light of the suffering; anyone who doesn't help the powerless help themselves – is working against Jesus. Is working against the Kingdom of God.

Again, do we know anyone like that? Have we had any of those thoughts?

Jesus is coming. He's bringing to full fruition God's Peaceable Kingdom. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing? Are we for it, or against it? Whose side are we on? The people Jesus is helping? Are we helping Jesus?

Our Luke passage is Mary's Magnificat. My soul magnifies the Lord. Elizabeth has just told Mary not only is Mary pregnant, but the baby will be the longed-for Messiah.

This sounds good. Mary feels great. God has done something wonderful.

What is Mary going to say next? Is she going to start gushing about onesies and the glow of pregnancy, the miracle of new life?

No! Mary says God has scattered the proud, the arrogant, those who don't help the poor, those who neglect the suffering. God has taken down the high and mighty.

God has not just taken down the powerful. God has not simply raised up the poor. God has done both at once. God has reversed the social structure. Like a pine-apple upside-down cake, God has flipped society on its head. What should be top is bottom. What should be bottom is top. God has turned things around.

God has taken a special interest in the powerless. God has taken a special interest in those choosing between the light bill, medicine, and food; those who don't know what supper will be until they get to Loaves and Fishes; those who don't know what they'll be eating next week until they've been to Broken Bread – and will it last the week?

But the rich – those who know where their next meal is coming from, those who have more than two days' food in their kitchen, who can afford rent and meds and heat and transportation **and** food – they will go hungry.

Again, all of us here today, everyone within the sound of my voice, we who are occupying positions of power, we who don't worry about having enough to eat: we don't have to live in our car. We don't need to live on a steady diet of Ramen noodles.

But are we on their side? All those people living in their car or subsisting on Ramen noodles, are we caring for them? Are we doing all we can to make their lives better?

I'm not trying to give anyone a guilt trip. We don't need to feel bad. All of us middle-class people – God loves us! Jesus died for us. That's one reason we celebrate his birth. Jesus died for you and me. That's a wonderful reason to celebrate his birthday.

But Jesus is also very clear: God has a special place for the poor, the suffering, the powerless and hurting. And if we are going to follow Jesus, if we are not going to take offence at him, stumble over him, be scandalized by what he's advocating, we need to pick a side. We can't abstain. We cannot sit on the fence.

By God's power the social structure is going to flip. The world is going to turn. And we can't sit on the sidelines.

We are either ministering to the poor and powerless, the suffering, the hurting, the hungry, or we are against them. That's

all the choice we have. We are either for Jesus and what he is doing, or we are against him.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. What have we learned about Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven? We've learned we're either on board and taking an active part in Jesus' ministry or we're against it. Those are our only choices. We can't sit on the fence. We have to pick a side. By God's grace, may we choose well. Amen.