

December 20, 2009: THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Luke 1:39-55; Micah 5:2-5a

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The technicality of how humans see is that the image our eyeball sends to our brains is actually upside down. The lens in our eyeball inverts the image of what we're looking at, and the brain processes the information to re-construct the image. According to our eyes, it's the world upside down. According to our brains, the world is right side up. To check out the brain's effectiveness on this, psychologists have fitted people with prism glasses (those triangular lenses used in periscopes) to make everything look upside down. At first, it's so disorienting that the subjects walk into walls and miss what they grab for. But after a day or two, the brain says, "This isn't right. I've gotta flip the information the eyeball is sending me." Even though the disorienting prisms are still there, the brain re-translates the information so perception and reality jibe and things once again appear right side up.

What this has to do with today's scripture lesson is Mary's greeting to her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. "Magnify!" How we perceive the world depends on the lens we use to look at it. It's like Christmas. We're so used to Christmas, the "surprise" has been programmed out of it. But this text is about surprise—God's surprise. Things are not as they should be, BUT--! It's "Magnify!" all over the place.

If you've ever used a magnifying glass, you know that what is meant by "magnify" is that the glass makes things appear bigger. Of course, we know the lens doesn't make the *object* bigger, it just makes the *image* bigger so that it fills our field of vision. It has to be a matter of perception, though, because depending on the focal point (how close the lens is to the object you're looking at), the image will appear larger or smaller. Microscopes are magnifying glasses that make really tiny things large enough to see, while telescopes are magnifying glasses that make objects smaller and upside down. It's all perception—and where the focal point is located. The *object* doesn't change size, but in a very real sense, our perception changes according to the lens we use and where we focus. In other words, when Mary says her soul *magnifies* the Lord, she means the Lord fills her field of vision and her focal point is located to make the Lord *bigger*, not smaller and upside down. It's a metaphorical summation of the life of discipleship. Mary's Magnificat is good science because, while it recognizes that when she *magnifies* the Lord, there is also a different focal point for looking at the world—the one where things get smaller and flipped upside down. Power, prestige, prosperity—smaller and upside down—as opposed to magnifying the Lord.

The relationship between the eyeball and the brain governs how we perceive what we're looking at. From the Magnificat we learn that what might seem upside down to us is not God's perception of things. But wait. Didn't the story of God's covenant relationship with Israel teach us that God blesses good people with riches? Didn't the prophets tell Israel that, no wonder they experienced drought or famine or exile—they had forgotten God. If they wanted to live independently of God, that was pretty much what they would get—drought, famine, exile, capture. But if they were obedient and trusted God, God kept the covenant promises of prosperity, prestige, place, posterity. So what's with Mary saying the powerful are dethroned and the rich sent away empty? If these are such bad guys, how come they've got all the good stuff? This is my opinion: this isn't about our perception, it's about God keeping promises to the full. While I grant that the perception of good in these reversals depends on which end of the spectrum you're on (rich or lowly, powerful or hungry), it is also a matter of the metaphorical brain doing the reversal trick again. When you hold a magnifying glass to an object, the object does not change size. It is our perception that changes with the focal point. God continues to keep the promises. We call that redemption.

You've probably run across experiences and events that seem to be absolute reversals of the way things oughta be, and yet, the affected persons act as if their lives are blessed, as if God has called them out for particular joys. The childless woman who, rather than spending a lifetime grieving that she has no children, seems to have countless children, nurturing people not biologically her own because she's a teacher, nurse, midwife, or deacon. Or the wealthy man who loses everything in the

stock market. Rather than turning into Ebenezer Scrooge or Bernie Madoff, he simplifies and adopts a lifestyle of service to others. Or the mother whose child is hurt by another. Rather than allowing her sense of injustice and powerlessness to morph into bitterness or helicopter mothering, she does the hard work of modeling learning forgiveness. Or the executive whose retirement means the loss of power and prestige. Rather than withdrawing from life or living for spa treatments and hobbies, the executive offers that expertise for free to non-for-profits.

We've heard the story so many times, there are so many traditions and things we gotta do, that we've programmed surprise out of Christmas. But the surprise is still there for those willing to perceive it. Things *are* upside down. It begins with "Magnify!" Things are not as they should be, BUT! God is able to right the world. I wonder if God wants to redeem what seems upside down to you. I wonder if God is even now bringing promises to fruition in you. How are things not the way they oughta be, and what is the reversal that reveals God's faithfulness—to you? The birth of Jesus, the incomprehensible gift of God's Son, is assurance that the world is, indeed, turned upside down. And that's good news.

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