

## **“Gifted, Lifted, and Shifted”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

December 11, 2022 – Third Sunday of Advent

[Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46-55](#)

Reversals in fortune are often key parts of the stories we love to tell. We love in the biblical story of Job how he, who was blessed in every way until his fortunes were reversed for the worse and he seemed to become cursed in every way, had his fortunes turned once more and he received even more blessings than ever. We love fairy tales like Cinderella, who was a happy and beloved child until her family becomes broken and she becomes the lowest of the lowly household servants, but who then she was lifted to the highest of heights by marrying a prince and becoming a princess. And in how many movies, like the *Wizard of Oz*, do we find the hero going on some difficult journey that leads them away from happiness and the comforts of home only to find their fortunes turn when they joyously return home and live happily ever after? These stories of people experiencing terrible circumstances, of losing everything or being completely lost, and then regaining or being reunited with family, friends appeal to us greatly. They are so enthralling and appealing because this is what we all hope for in our own lives, that we will somehow overcome our own difficulties and misfortunes in life and that the fortunes of our own lives would somehow be reversed.

In today's scripture lessons, we read good news about God doing just this work of reversal in the lives of people. In the gospel lesson from Luke, we read one of the most beautiful and beloved passages of our scriptures, Mary's song that she sings to her relative Elizabeth after learning from an angel that she will give birth to one who would be called the Son of God and would be a great ruler, resuming the reign of the line of his ancestor David. At the time the angel came to Mary, she was a young, unmarried woman, who was already engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. The news that she, though being a virgin, was to give birth to a child, no matter how holy the child would be, could have been completely wrecked her life. Being an unwed, teenage mom is difficult in our own time; in Mary's world, it would have been more than just difficult; it would have been devastating. Her wedding to Joseph would likely have been called off, she could have been shunned by her own family and community, and she would have become unmarriageable. As women in her society had little agency, especially

when they were unmarried, the prospects for her life and the life of her child would have been bleaker than bleak. And yet Mary, trusting that God was doing something great for the world through her, does not despair and does not beg for the angel to offer her some other news instead, to reverse her fortunes. She does not consider the role she has been given to be a curse upon her, but a great blessing. Mary receives the news as *the best news*, that a Messiah was to come to her, to her oppressed people, and to all the people of the world, that her fortunes and those of all people were being reversed for the better, and so Mary rejoices!

Mary feels gifted, and she responds by singing her joyful song about reversals, that God was at work, bringing the powerful down and lifting the lowly up and feeding the hungry with good things that were normally unavailable to them as they were hoarded by those who already had too many good things. Mary proclaimed that the time had come for the poor to no longer become poorer because the rich became richer. She proclaimed that the vision of God for people, the vision of the prophets, that the world's people would dwell together in peace, was becoming realized.

In proclaiming this great truth of God to Elizabeth, Mary, who was gifted, was also lifted, taking the role of prophet and echoing Isaiah's earlier prophecy that we also read this morning, a prophecy that also tells of reversals of fortune. The good words of Isaiah were likely given to people who were then suffering from the misfortune of being an oppressed people living in exile, having been conquered by others and taken away from their own land by them. They were in captivity in a foreign land when the message came to them that all would be reversed, that people who knew only pain and brokenness would be made whole and that the dry and barren land itself would blossom and shout for joy. Isaiah saw that God would provide a holy highway that would lead people on a smooth and straight path from their sorrowful existence to this better place where they would enjoy the reversal of their fortunes. Isaiah envisioned a new exodus of God's people from the place where they were to the better place God where called them to be.

Mary saw that, because of the gift she was carrying, the time had come for the people to traverse that highway and to enjoy that better place, for the fortunes of people to be forever shifted as they dwell together in peace.

In this Advent season, we remember that what was promised through Isaiah began to be realized in the time of Mary, and we hope that God's work of reversals would continue in our own time until all is shifted into becoming what it should be. We pay attention to God's ongoing work of salvation as we sing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!", and we work to prepare room in our hearts to allow Christ to more perfectly reign over us. We long, this Advent, to see more of a shift within us, that we would move further down that highway towards the peaceful realm that God desires for us and all the world's people.

Friends, let us move further down the highway to hope, the highway to healing, and the highway to wholeness by joyfully submitting ourselves anew to Christ's reign in our hearts. Let us do the prophetic work of proclaiming the good news that God desires a better way for the world's people than our ways of making war and taking from one another and elevating some to enjoy good things while denying others of those same blessings. And let's continue to do our part to help realize the shift that God desires for all of us by doing whatever we can to engage in God's work of feeding the hungry, lifting up the lowly, and making peace. May we be gifters, lifters, and shifters today and every day! Amen.