

**“The Upside Down”**  
**Luke 1:46b-55**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
**December 17, 2017**

There’s been a rise of dystopian novels and movies in the last ten years especially among teenagers. Maybe you’ve noticed it: *the Hunger Games* featuring teenagers battling each other to death in a sick contest arranged by the adults in power; the *Divergent Series* set in post-apocalyptic Chicago where kids are forced into particular tracks based on a set of virtues. Divergent kids who show the possibilities of crossing those tracks, of breaking out of those silos, are a threat to the society. And then there’s the Netflix hit *Stranger Things*.

Four middle school aged boys discover an alternate dimension – what they call “the upside down” - when one of the boys is kidnapped by a terrifying monster. Winona Rider plays the frantic, frazzled mother of the disappeared boy who refuses to accept more believable explanations for his disappearance. One of the most horrifying parts of the first season is when no one believes her – not the police chief searching for the boy, not her ex-husband who hopes to profit from his son’s disappearance, not her older son who fears his mother is going insane.

Mary sings of her own kind of upside down. One where a young woman pregnant out of wedlock is blessed instead of cursed, where the proud are scattered instead of powerful, where the powerful are brought down instead of lifted up, and the rich are sent away instead of put in charge. But in the alternate reality of which she sings, she has everything to celebrate and nothing to fear.

This is a key difference between the dystopian genres of our time and the apocalyptic Advent texts of our tradition. The dystopian vision warns the great majority of people - if things

don't change, a dangerous future is coming to us: a future where the weak get trampled, where the poor get crushed, where humanity itself is defaced. We must take action lest we open up a gateway to an alternate dimension more dangerous, more deadly, and more unbelievably cold and dark than even what we've seen. But the apocalyptic texts take a different route. God's future is coming to us. A good future where the weak get lifted up, the poor are valued, the hungry fed, and humanity is restored. Whether or not we see it as good will depend largely on where we are standing today. Those who want to preserve the old order will see themselves swept away with it. But those who actively participating in its inauguration will be the first to celebrate.

There is an alternate dimension all right, but it's not one that God hopes we will fear. It's one we are invited to accept today, even before it comes. A dimension of joy where the rough places are smoothed out, where everyone has enough, where those who mourn today rejoice to see that life is stronger than death.

*Stranger Things* is set in the early 1980s which made it the perfect thing to watch with my middle school daughter. It fed her dystopian hunger (after all middle school, itself, is its own kind of dystopian horror), as well as my 1980s nostalgia: the big hair and massive bangs, the striped socks pulled up to the knees, Atari, Dig Dug, and other video games of the age that took too many of my hard-earned quarters, VCRs, suburban fetishes, and of course, a soundtrack of emerging '80s hits – Foreigner, the Clash, Kenny Rodgers, Jefferson Airplane, Toto. Part of me was absolutely delighted. The other part of me was absolutely horrified to catch myself nostalgic for the '80s. You know things are really bad when the 1980s are what we start longing for. And therein lies the weakness of the dystopian approach. When the future looks totally bleak, we are left

mainly with *the past as our hope* and *the past as our guide* - a past that isn't worth longing for.

The trouble is that the dystopian vision is more believable than the apocalyptic one. It is easier to believe that our nation is moving away from neighborliness and toward selfishness, the rich are getting more this Christmas than they got even in the 1980s, the proud have millions of Twitter followers, the poor are multiplying on our street corners, the aliens have become the scapegoats for all of our sins. The dystopian vision seems more self-evident than the apocalyptic one.

I think my instinct to want to say *that* - to name it - not to sweep it under the rug - has done more than simply earned my reputation as the pastor who wants to turn Advent into, as one of you called it last week, "Sad-vent." Perhaps at times I've leaned more toward dystopian warning instead of apocalyptic hope. Perhaps I've implied that the upside down that is near to us is like the one in *Stranger Things* - cold and isolating, harsh and full of dread.

Mary is the better example than me. Her massive hope for the way the world is turning comes from such a small thing - the announcement of a child. In that fragile promise of flesh and blood - a new life - she sees evidence that the world is being turned upside down. The saving of the world starts in the smallest of ways - an announcement that the world is going to turn. Maybe my mistake is in trying to make that hope less fragile than it is. Trying to make that hope more certain than it actually is. Trying to make that hope bigger than in the way God sends it.

To do so is to try to relieve us from the necessity of faith. It's to try to root hope in something other than faith. It's to try to control hope instead of letting hope lead us beyond what we can control. I think that's probably the temptation of every pastor of a church full of well-educated skeptics. The

temptation to want to make faith more certain than it is, to make future promises more certain than they are, to make faith more reasonable than it is. To try to explain what can only be confessed. To try to take the risk out of faith instead of pulling back the curtain to see for yourself that God's joy doesn't arrive in spite of our vulnerability or outside of it, but in the middle of it.

Perhaps that's the key for catching glimpses of the world as it's coming – for looking into “the upside down.” God's joy doesn't come in packages that are outside of our pain, outside of our vulnerability, outside of our strain and turmoil, outside of our humanity. God's joy comes in the middle of it – small tastes of the joy that is to come. I think I saw it last week in odd and unexpected ways.

I saw last Thursday when the most diverse group of leaders I've ever seen gathered in a Latino church in Baltimore with the shared conviction that violence can be overcome. I watch it at Session meeting when an elder confessed the dread of another family division made plain at Christmas and I saw before my eyes the church family at that meeting table holding the hope for reconciliation for this elder so he didn't have to hold it all by himself. Geralyn testified to it over the phone when she told me about holding her mother's hand as she took her last breath. “Please tell the congregation,” she said “to give thanks to God.” “Tell that that I am so grateful to have shared that holy space.” I felt it in an embrace with my friend and colleague William, shot 3 times, addicted to the drugs he once sold, who spent 17 years in prison, a victim of the streets. I still marvel at how Jesus ever managed to bridge the gap between a Black man from east Baltimore and a white boy from the suburban south working together through a shared kind of a pain, a shared kind of hope for a future neither one of us have yet to see. I heard about it from a youth, counseling her

stressed out friends that where they go to college isn't going to make or break the rest of their life – your SATs, your college rejections are always the wrong judge of your future. And then I thought of our brother, Jim, grieving the loss of a child; a terrible loss known by a few of us; shouldered yesterday by the arms of so many people who love him – every tear matched by another embrace.

These are glimpses of the upside down – the world that is coming. Glimpses of true joy that God is bringing. Justice established, promises kept, God's people remember. Glimpses that come most clearly, most poignantly, most powerfully in our weakness, where we can see God's strength, God's activity, God's presence most clearly. Joy that is glimpsed perhaps most powerfully when the tears are still fresh on our cheeks.

Mary is convinced that the world will be turned upside down. She's so convinced she sings in the past tense – as if it's already been accomplished. May we learn the confidence of her lyrics so we, too, can sing her song.