

13 December 2020,  
Advent 3  
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11;  
Luke 1:46-55  
On the road to  
Restoration  
First Mennonite  
Church

It's been a tough year. Covid-19 has killed 1.6 million people around the world. That's a lot of grieve and sadness. It has



infected over 71 million people, some very mildly and others severely. A friend of mine got Covid back in March. She got better but to this day has side effects. Every couple of months she has this sensation come on and she finds it hard to breath. Covid-19 has disrupted our holy days. During the first wave, Easter worship services were disrupted. We didn't have an Easter breakfast because the church was closed. We had an online worship service instead. Our cultural tradition of gathering together with our families was also disrupted. Now, as we approach Christmas, we are in the middle of a second wave. Again, our cultural traditions of attending Christmas



concerts and family gatherings are—and will be—disrupted. In between the first and second wave of the pandemic, we experienced a range of losses—from loved ones to a loss of a way of life. Out of compassion and love to our wider community—especially our vulnerable neighbours and friends—we've exchanged masks for hugs, take away for table fellowship, and online meetings for in-person gatherings. This year has been tough. It's been disruptive.

Today, we are on the road to restoration. I'm sure we all long for restoration. I used to think of restoration in quite simple terms, like this factory reset button on my mobile phone. If I would press it, all my emails, text messages, all my contacts, and all of my applications would be deleted and my phone would be **restored** to how it was back when I bought it three years ago. Another simplistic way I used to think of

restoration was when I repaired and restored our antique dining room table to its former glory. There are some who think the Covid-19 vaccine will quickly restore our lives back to our pre-Covid days. A year ago, my spouse and I were busy planning a three-week trip to NZ; I'm not sure how much confidence a vaccine will give me to hop into a sealed cylindrical tube, in close proximity to hundreds of strangers, for a 15-hour flight. Restoration. I used to think of it in simple terms.



Odd, we come to Christmas thinking of Christmas as the time of restoration when everything is set right. Christmas is the time to come home, to return to that time in our memories when all was warm, and good and right, when we gathered with our families, in large groups, to eat, laugh, play games, tell stories—a time when, at least for a few days in December, things were as they used to be. Restored.

Yet in the bible, Christmas was a time when everything was disrupted and turned upside down. It wasn't about a middle-class, traditional family-valued mother caring for a conventional child. It was about Mary, a poor unwed mother, expectant in the most unconventional, disruptive way. The message of the baby's arrival came not through official, governmentally sanctioned commercial channels; it was delivered in song by angels. The good news came not to the learned and the powerful, but to marginalized shepherds working the night shift. They were the first ones to hear the Good News. Not to the biblical scholars pouring over their sacred texts in Jerusalem, but to magi, Gentile astrologers, who were outside of Israel's faith. Baby Jesus, whose birth we sing about every year, lay in a cattle trough, not an expensive pram.

When Mary got the news from the angel, telling her that she was going to have a baby, Emmanuel, a Messiah to bless and restore the world, she sang a restorative Christmas Carol, which in Latin is called, the Magnificat. Listen to her song.

And Mary sang

*for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

Wait a minute! **This doesn't sound like restoration, but revolution!** It doesn't sound at all like a simple action to bring back or fix what was lost or broken, like the reset button on my mobile phone that will restore my OS to an earlier time. Nor is this song of restoration like a vaccine that will quickly restore our lives to how they were pre-Covid. No.



The restoration Mary celebrates stands in stark contrast to our deeply held cultural traditions. Mary's song is rooted in God who will bring about a new heaven and a new earth—a new creation rooted in God's justice and peace. In fact, the restoration Mary sings about will cause all sorts of disruption.

For Mary, accepting God's call caused all sorts of disruption in her life. She didn't live with her husband, Joseph, and yet she was pregnant. I imagine this news caused an uproar in Nazareth. Her fiancé, Joseph, almost divorced her because of her perceived infidelity, but changed his mind after encountering an angel in a dream who said:

*'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:20-21).*

A little later in Luke, Mary learnt from Simeon that being the mother of the Messiah would be incredibly disruptive. She would need to bear the unspeakable grief of watching as her son rejected, shamed, and crucified:

*"This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34–35).*

Not just personal disruption but social, political and economic disruption too. God's restoration project isn't just a heavenly mansion where our souls go to after we die; God's restoration project includes embodied people. Restoration is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God's restorative work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with actual food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary's Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honour, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. At the same time, God's restorative work will disrupt the world's power structures, dethrone rulers, and humble the mighty.

And it has. During the British rule of India, Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, was prohibited from being sung in church. The British, it seemed, didn't want poor Indians to think salvation was possible in this life. In the 1980s, Guatemala's government discovered Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala's impoverished masses. Mary's words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus, the government banned any public recitation of Mary's words.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly God's restoration that Mary envisions is good news for the poor and lowly, but what does Mary's song mean for the wealthy and the powerful? And I include myself in the rich and powerful category. Is there nothing but judgment for them? Though judgment and salvation may seem like opposites, they go hand in hand. Those who stand in awe only of themselves and their own power will be judged. Yet if the wealthy and powerful can only see it, by bringing themselves down—by emptying and humbling themselves—God is saving them. When they turn their gaze from themselves and their own accomplishments, when their awe is directed to God — then there is mercy for them, too.

Both in Mary's song and in Jesus' ministry we see the God who **loves us as we are** but does **not leave us as we are**. Zacchaeus, for example, shows how God restores us. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus is wealthy, but he is also a scorned outsider. When Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus's house, the encounter leaves Zacchaeus welcomed into community, emptied of his lust for wealth, and profoundly changed. His gaze is redirected from himself toward Jesus. He no longer sees only his own needs and desires as paramount. Now he sees those whom he has harmed in his quest for money and security. Jesus brings Zacchaeus down from his wealth and up from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://forums.catholic.com/t/next-time-you-recite-the-magnificat/515808>

isolation and into community. In the process Jesus restores him to a relationship with God and with his community. Jesus says, Salvation has come to his house (Luke 19:9).

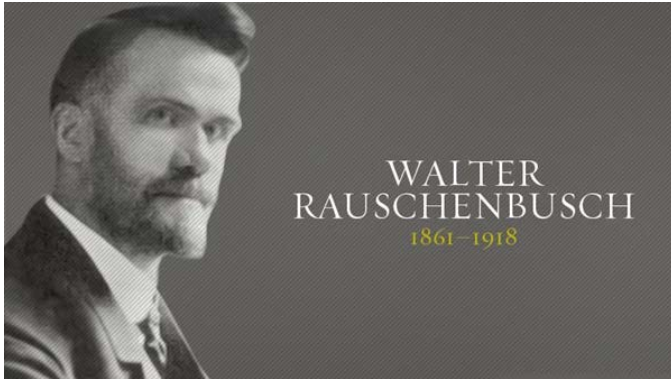
When God empties the rich of their excess and fills the hungry with good things, the result is **not social reversal**—with the powerless and the powerful changing places. We saw this kind of reversal in violent revolutions of the Russian Revolution where the communists overthrew the corrupt Czar. Basically, all it accomplished was untold misery and death for millions, where a group at the bottom of society replaced the group in power. The oppressed became the new oppressors.



This is **not** what Mary sings. What Mary sings is much more a social leveling. The rich and powerful are stripped of their arrogance self-interest and taught to love their neighbours as much as they love themselves. Thus God provides for the poor and honours the humiliated. When the arrogant are scattered and the powerful brought down, then everyone can have enough—enough food to eat, enough water to drink, enough clothes to wear, enough shelter to live in—a world where no one has too much. I'm reminded of that verse of restoration from the prophet Micah:

*but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid (Micah 4:4).*

Mary's song envisions a Messiah who loves the whole world with a love that restores creation—makes it whole. But the road to restoration is full of disruption. And consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, that's why you're here today—because your world may not be all that it could be. And consider the risk that you take by joining the Messiah on the road. Consider the risk of having your already disruptive year being even more disrupted. Our Bible is full of stories of people just like Mary, who had their world disrupted when they came face to face with a God who will restore the world.



In my second year of Bible college, I had to read a book from a list of books my professor suggested and write a book report on it. I looked over the list and picked one from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book was written by a Baptist, Walter Rauschenbusch, and it was entitled, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. Basically, the main argument of

the book was that God was working in the world to create social change and social justice. Christians needed to become involved in social work, work on programmes to feed the poor and that kind of thing. The more we would do the better society would



become. Through our collective good we could bring about the Kingdom of God. When I read the book, I was completely unaware at how the social gospel movement impacted early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada.

The movement was responsible for the creation of CCF Party in

Canada, which eventually became the NDP. It had a powerful influence on the United Church of Canada.



When I reflect back today, I have many criticisms of the theology of the social gospel. But, when I first read the book, I was completely unaware of the history. All I know was this book disrupted me. It changed me. I began to read the Bible differently. I began to question my Sunday School faith. I began to ask myself all sorts of ethical questions like why are people poor and others rich? Where and how do I spend my money? How much is enough? I continue to this day to ask these questions of myself. It was one of those moments where I was born again! I was dislodged from my comfort zone. I was disrupted.

Mary is a smart young woman to know that being on the road in close proximity to the manger is a dangerous place to be. Here's a God who loves to disrupt us while we're on the road. It's all part of God's restoration of creation, God's desire to makes things right!

“Oh come, let us adore him”, is a song we sing at Christmas. How many of us came to church this morning expecting to meet what we have always thought before we came here? Have we come, expecting the fulfillment of all of our desires, the confirmation of all of our preconceptions? Just look at the baby! The baby Jesus has a face just like our face. He’s cuddly and cute; what harm could there be in a baby?

Here’s a friendly reminder: take care as you gaze into the manger this Christmas. There’s a risk to being on the road with Jesus. Restoration brings disruption. Amen