

PUTTING THE WORLD TO RIGHTS¹

I'd like to use this sermon to invite you to adopt a theme for this whole Christmas season. Before we get too immersed in the shopping, party-going, travel, and even church, consider holding in mind an overall summary of what it all means. Here's the summary: "Putting the "World to Rights." Jesus Christ came into the world—that what Christmas is all about—Jesus came into the world to put the world to rights. He came to fix embedded, persistent brokenness. He came to fix what is wrong with the world and what is wrong with you and me.

Someone here is not too sure about this. Is putting world to rights really what Jesus' coming is all about? Obviously, we don't want to be carrying around in our thoughts some commanding overview of the season's meaning if we're not convinced that that's what it indeed is all about.

Here's how I justify this theme. Take a look at our lessons today. First, we have the mother of Jesus, Mary's canticle of praise. It's called "The Magnificat," which is Latin for the first words of the song. "My soul magnifies (magnificat) the Lord..." Now, generally speaking poetic passages or songs embedded in Bible stories are particularly strong vehicles for the theology or meaning of the action. So the story line is about the expectant mother of Jesus visiting her

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cousin, Elizabeth, who is also expecting a baby. The significance of these events is carried by the song on Mary's lips.

What does Mary sing about? She praises God to start with. No surprise there. Then she sings about herself as being lowly. Mary hasn't seemed so very lowly up until now. But she sees God's work in her life as both lifting her up and lifting up all people of "low degree," as she puts it.

What's more, the rich and powerful in Mary's song are being brought down from their thrones. They are empty and scattered.

Isn't it interesting that Mary doesn't see her pregnancy so much as a personal joy, but the occasion when, at long last, the hungry and powerless, and lowly get relief.

Let's leave Mary behind and go out to the fields around Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth. We all know the scene by heart. Angels visit shepherds. We have more singing. First a single angel announces Jesus' birth.

I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord.

We've heard it a thousand times. But maybe we weren't listening to it knowing that such words are providing the master key that unlocks the meaning of the events. Who is born? A savior.

Okay. The scandal in that word savior is that it means a

political leader who will, well, put the world to rights. The great Augustus Caesar, who sat on the throne in Rome, was proclaimed a savior because he held promise to bring peace and prosperity to the whole Roman Empire. It's a subtle little piece of propaganda for Christians to call Jesus a savior.

After this, the singing really breaks out as the angel choir belts out: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace." Again, peace here means the comprehensive state of well-being where injustice and struggle are set aside forever.

Both of these lessons, both songs, open marvelous windows of truth that let a wonderful light in. Jesus Christ came into the world set into motion God's intention to bring relief to the downtrodden, fairness to those who never get a break, and peace to the world. Putting the World to rights.

Of course, that dream of a world put right is still in the future. But the wheels are in motion. Jesus came, he taught, and healed and died, was raised and ascended into heaven. And the dream is still alive. A world set right. Our broken and sinful lives set right. And that vision, I would propose is how we may look at Christmas this year.

I have long wondered why Christmas is such a warm optimistic time of year. Arguably, Easter time, which joins Jesus' crucifixion and rise from the dead, is more important.

But Christmas is by far the bigger holiday. Christmas has inspired a whole collection of music that for many of us is more beloved than all other music. Why does Christmas have such an impact and rosy feel?

I propose that it has to do with the optimism of realizing that the evil and violence and unfairness that is so dominant will be defeated.

Isn't a world set right what every human deeply longs for? I believe it is. Go to any playground and simply listen to children at play. You won't have to wait long before some kid will cry out. "That isn't fair!" We pick up pretty early that it is immensely important for all people to have a fair shake in life—even in the games of children on a playground.

God shares that yearning. A grand theme, which threads its way through the entire Bible, is that God wants this world to be peaceful and fair and wholesome. It just wouldn't do for God's people to be slaves in Egypt. So, God set them free and taught them to live free and fair in the Promised Land.

Neither would it do for people to live beset by sin and lovelessness. So, Jesus gave himself up to change all of that.

By the way, there's good reason to believe that Jesus' core message was that the Kingdom of God had arrived. What do you think that means? That's a real question for us. What exactly

was Jesus talking about when he said that God's kingdom had dawned? Something had shifted. Something was new. The obvious thing that had changed was that God himself—God the Son—had arrived in history. Was there more going on? It's a neat question. I'd like to hear what you think Jesus meant.

One thing we do know. God's loving intention to set the world to rights is underway. And Christmas is the season we enjoy that momentous fact. Christmas is the time when it is particularly obvious that poor people should not be poor. Because in the kingdom, which is emerging, there aren't going to be poor people. Isn't this the reason we do such projects like the Dove Tree? We do Dove Tree as a way of welcoming God's Kingdom and our king, Jesus.

So, my proposal is to not only let the tunes of Christmas songs and all the busyness and tradition occupy your thoughts, but also this little phrase, "putting the world to rights." Why the baby in the manger? God putting the world to rights. Why do we gravitate to the stories like "Christmas Carol" and the "Little Match Girl," and even Grinch? Because in them we detect the Spirit of Christmas which is the prospect of a world put right. Why do we want to be more helpful, more hospitable, and more generous? Because that will be the way we behave all the time in this world put right.