An Enemy of the People

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Luke 1: 39-56

Our culture really doesn't get advent—at all. Because advent has no commercial purpose, the larger culture is understandably interested only in rushing headlong into Christmas, by which I mean bells and bows and mistletoe—I heard my first Christmas music in a store the first week of November before the Jack O'Lanterns were off of the front porches of our neighborhood.

But even **the church** doesn't always get advent as we should—we get that it is a time of waiting: one candle two candles, three candles, four but maybe it's the **waiting for what** that at times eludes us. We prepare ourselves to welcome a newborn king, but are we really ready to welcome the newborn kingdom that he ushers in? That is a question for advent. Advent, properly observed, is for reflecting upon how distant the kingdom yet remains, and how world changing it is, and perhaps about whether we are really ready to go there, or about what we must change at what cost.

Our scripture text for this morning—Mary's song of praise from Luke's gospel, known as the Magnificat because that is the first word in Latin, is a song of transformation and upheaval, and change that some might find unwelcome.

But before getting to the scripture, I'd like to start elsewhere with a piece that helps me to read the scripture differently, and I think, more impactfully, at least for me. Not long ago, I had the opportunity to revisit the old Henrik Ibsen play, An Enemy of the People, a really brilliant study in human nature and community relationships that has been performed and adapted many times. The setting of the play is a coastal town in Southern Norway—a quaint and quiet little village, without a whole lot in the way of commerce or employment opportunities.

The town's crown jewel, its one great claim to fame, is its public baths, built and promoted, with no expense spared, as mineral baths with wondrous healing properties. The baths are said to soothe anxieties and heal infirmities, and invalids and visitors come from far and wide to bathe in the waters and to be made well. The town's economy is certainly healthy.

Except for one small problem. The local doctor, Doctor Stockmann, begins to notice that a number of visitors to the baths are becoming ill: typhoid cases, gastric fevers, unexplained illnesses just a bit too frequent to ignore. He begins to suspect that what the people promote as healthy is deeply un-healthy, that rather than having healing properties, the town baths are actually the source of the problem, a great big public health hazard with pestilence in the pipes.

Dr. Stockmann's theory is that the water used for the baths is being contaminated as it seeps through the

grounds of the local tannery…and he sends away samples for testing.

When the water samples are returned, confirming his suspicions beyond a shadow of a doubt, Dr. Stockman is overjoyed. A disaster of epic proportions can be avoided. The good Doctor celebrates with his family that he will be named and hailed as a hero of the people.

And as the Doctor begins to spread the news of his discovery, it appears that it is **good news for all**—yes, there will be some considerable expense to rip out the plumbing for the baths and redirect it to a different water source, yes, the baths might be shut down for a season, but thousands of visitors to the town will be spared from illness or even death, and the town itself will be spared from—well, from the horror of causing harm to innocent people. It is a win-win situation.

But then, a curious thing happens. A curious, tragic thing.

One by one, as the news settles in, public officials and tradespeople begin to realize that **good news for all** is not exactly the same as **good news for each**…I'll say that once more because it is important, good news for all is not necessarily received as good news for each. Good news is not the same as no cost.

If the news of the illnesses gets out, if the baths are closed for repairs and the plumbing re-routed, well then:

Certain public officials might be held accountable for their errors. They could lose their reputation, their influence, or even their public office.

Some merchants could see their livelihoods suffer. If the baths are closed down for repairs, where will the tourists go? On up the coast to neighboring towns? And if they go, will they ever come back?

The town's comfortable way of life could be disrupted and changed, perhaps permanently.

Slowly but surely, the very people who hailed the doctor as a hero begin to pressure him: surely a little surface-level cleanup will suffice. A quick-fix, a less invasive solution, a spackling of the cracks instead of a deeper repair. "Say the problem isn't as great as you first thought, doctor. Say you were overzealous, doctor. Say you were WRONG, doctor—or else.

The doctor refuses—he will not be party to living a lie that puts one group of people at risk in order that another group of people may prosper. So eventually (and ironically) in Ibsen's play, the doctor, who had expected to be welcomed as a **hero of the people**, is named as precisely the opposite—an ENEMY of the people. He ends up ostracized by the whole town, with rocks thrown through his windows, and even those who first supported him turn away.

Good news for all, it turns out, is only welcome news as long as it doesn't cost anybody too much or cause anybody to change their lives too dramatically.

This understanding brought forth by Ibsen's play is a helpful if deeply challenging insight as we now turn afresh to our scripture lesson for this morning, Mary's song of praise as she celebrates with her relative Elizabeth the news that Mary will bear God's son, the longed-for Messiah.

As Mary celebrates, we hear tidings that can only come as good news to all the people: "From now on, all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name. He has shown strength with his arm, and lifted up the lowly, and filled the hungry with good things." Surely, when the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are fed, there is cause for the world to rejoice….

But as with Doctor Stockmann's rejoicing that the public baths can now be set right, that which comes as good news to all does not come without a cost to some. We hear that cost as we read Mary's celebratory song from the other side of the fence:

He has scattered the proud…brought down the powerful from their thrones…sent the rich away empty…Mary isn't saying eat the rich…but she's saying that the messiah will unwind systems that oppress the poor.

This is the part where everyone begins to calculate who gets the plumber's bill for replumbing the public baths. Or whose world gets disrupted by world-changing news. And when that happens…well, a hero of the people—even a long-awaited messiah—can quickly be received as an enemy of the people.

Well, as we know all too well, looking back across the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Mary's prophetic words end up hovering like a bat above the manger. Her baby, who comes that the world might live—live differently—live fully as God intends--comes as a king that the movers and shakers and power brokers, the kings of this world, will not necessarily welcome. The kingdom of God is no small threat to the current occupants.

Our first hint is found in Matthew's gospel, where King Herod, upon learning that a child has been born under a special star…sets out to exterminate the threat. His own children might be kept from the throne…and so he issues a terrible edict that all male children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old and under…MUST DIE.

When threatened, you see, kings play for keeps. So, Jesus begins his life as a refugee—a refugee—a refugee…in Egypt. And how do the comfortable, the privileged, the settled, encounter refugees?

In adulthood, Jesus is no more welcome than as a child. Even as he brings healing and hope to the outcast and the downcast, the hurting and the hopeless, Jesus clashes

again and again and again and again with the political AND THE RELIGIOUS leaders of the day, those who hold status within the status quo. The kingdom of God, you see, threatens to bring down the powerful from their thrones and their pulpits, to scatter the proud and to lift up the lowly, and feed the poor from the tables of the rich—not leftovers or handouts but a genuine place at the table. It is a total replumbing of the baths and nothing less. The messiah is like a divine Robin Hood, come to proclaim a leveling of the playing field: which is good news to all that does not necessarily come as good news to each.
And, of course we know the ultimate cost that Jesus pays…the world he came to save received him not: an enemy of the people, so to speak, ostracized, vilified, crucified.

I preach this not so cozy sermon on this, the second Sunday of advent, 2018, so that, as Christmas Eve draws nearer, we are not seduced by the golden glow of a perfect, candlelit manger scene that never quite was. We proclaim something, we await something far more radical and far more costly than sentiment and tradition. If we would call ourselves friends of Christ, then we, with him, are--or should be--enemies of the systems, structures and world views that afford us privilege while others go hungry.

We are, or we should be, enemies of a consumptive consumerism that feels entitled to the lion's share of the world's resources. People of God, as we look around us, we see the current costs of the way things are:

People are hungry; refugees are a desperate disparate diaspora; the world is torn by warfare; the environment is threatened by the rate of our culture's consumption, and yet the whole world longs to live as we do, if you can even imagine what the cost of that would be.

Can it be that Ibsen's play is a prophetic word for our day? That the very privilege and prosperity in which we are bathing, the things that we think bring us healing and happiness, may slowly be poisoning us all? Our impulse, our reaction may be to preserve things as they are, to make only small repairs, and the way to do that is to wrap the savior's birth is sentiment and tradition, to make Christmas about memories and not transformation. Advent invites us to a different path—reflection, repentance, replumbing. The contemplation that our comfort may not be disconnected from the world's deep need.

And can it be that our hope, our only hope, might be found in Mary's wild earthquake of a song: a child who points us in a different direction, who invites us to feed the world from our plates, rather than filling our plates from the world? To welcome refugees rather than building walls? To be custodians of the world's resources rather than merely consumers? Are we ready for the Kingdom's inversion? It is the costliest of hopes…and the greatest of good news…but it requires an awful lot of replumbing, not without cost. And perhaps a bit more Advent reordering than we had first imagined. Come, Lord Jesus. Thy kingdom come. Amen.