

“Trading Places” GPPC 12-23-18
Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-55

“Trading Places” is the title of a 1983 movie starring Dan Aykroyd, Eddie Murphy, Don Ameche, Ralph Bellamy, and Jaime Lee Curtiss. How many of you have seen it? Several times? Know all the lines? Okay. I suspected as much from this crowd.

Some of you highbrow types may also know the movie bears some resemblance to Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper* and to Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*.

For those of you who have not seen it, I’ll go ahead and tell you the plot and spoil the ending. Set in Philadelphia, Mortimer and Randolph Duke, filthy rich investment tycoon brothers decide to make a secret bet. As part of the bet, they frame (and fire) Louis Winthorp III one of their young, rising star employees (played by Dan Aykroyd). And then they put a street hustler, Billy Ray Valentine (played by Eddie Murphy), in his place in the company. The bet (tinged with racism) asks: Is success based on nature or nurture? By the end of the movie, Billy

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Ray and Louis answer the question as they turn the tables on the Dukes, becoming rich while making the Dukes poor.

The rich become poor and the poor become rich. And where have we heard that kind of talk before?

After traveling to meet her cousin Elizabeth and hearing Elizabeth pronounce God's blessing upon her as the future mother of the Lord, Mary launches into a song. It's a strange song, similar to Hannah's song found in 1 Samuel chapter two. In both these songs the women sing about the amazing and surprising power of God. Mary's song is often known as *The Magnificat*, the first words of the song in Latin, words that are also part of Handel's *Messiah*.

Mary sings, "My soul magnifies (glorifies) the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

And praising God is usually a good way to start a church hymn, right?

So the song starts well and as expected. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." But then Mary does something unusual. She changes the verb tenses for most of the rest of

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the song. Mary does not use the present tense “the Lord *is* doing something.” And she does not use the future tense “the Lord *is going* to do something.” No. Instead, Mary switches to the past tense. “The Lord *has* done something.” Mary sings about God’s actions in the past tense for most of the song? Why?

Because she is certain that what she sings about is going to happen. It’s a done deal. It’s in the bank. It’s unstoppable. Bet on it, baby. We don’t even need to play the game; just go ahead and give us the trophy. God’s going to get it done.

So with that utter confidence not in herself but in God, Mary does not sing a mournful song of longing “If only.” Nor does she sing a song of regret “I’m so sorry.” No. Mary sings a victory song—the organ belting out big, fat, major chords, antiphonal piccolo trumpets bouncing our eardrums around, sopranos singing into the stratosphere and breaking glass. Mary sings God’s victory song.

But what a peculiar victory song it is. Hear her sing.

“God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”

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Those who are arrogant--no matter who they are, what powers they exercise or abuse, what office they hold--those who are arrogant are shown by God to be nothing more than scatterbrains. Those who are haughty are demonstrated by God to have nothing to brag about. Those who forget who they are and whose they are and become proud, God will show to be scatterbrains, not geniuses.

Let us be modest about who we are. Let us be humble.

And “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Those who sit on thrones are brought down to sit where the lowly have been, while the lowly are lifted up. The hungry get their fill, and the rich are sent away empty.

It is a peculiar song, especially in our 21st century “success at any cost, I got mine; too bad you didn’t get yours,” ears. In a time when the church is told to be silent about policies that hurt the poor and hungry, because “that is political;” this *song* is political. And here we are, two days before Christmas, and the USDA has just unveiled plans to further

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restrict food stamps, something that will especially hurt the poor and children as they go hungry.

And in a “me first” age when many do not believe God deserves to be worshiped, because we have other important things to do, this is a disquieting song that reminds us of the supremacy of God alone.

Do we want to sing along with Mary? Or would we rather she sing alone? Do we want to hear Mary’s song? Or would we rather change the channel to something less jarring?

But here’s the thing; Mary’s trading places song is ultimately good news. Her song promises that the arrogant will finally know the truth about themselves, about others, and especially about God. The powerful will not always push the lowly around and the lowly will not always be lowly or pushed around either. The hungry will not always be hungry and the rich will not always have too much. God is going to bring about a new social order based not on cutthroat competition but upon holy equality and generous sharing.

God is going to do this. It’s a done deal. So what’s coming does not depend upon whether we are smart enough, organized enough, or

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even good enough. God's going to do it, and it doesn't depend upon our imperfect efforts. It's so certain we can just say God has done it—past tense.

But since it is coming, we are invited (and even commanded) to do our part as instruments of God to move the world just a little bit closer to the reign of God that has come and is coming. And if we are part of that movement, maybe when the final trading places comes it will feel less like a demotion to us and more like a shared celebration. Together we'll sing a haunting melody that somehow will seem so beautiful yet also so familiar. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal