

**“Lifted Up”**  
**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55**  
**Rev. Dr. Deborah L. Clark**  
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“So... you just quit smoking....” I knew she wasn’t talking to me, but I couldn’t help glancing up from my papers in curiosity. A young woman with scraggly blond hair, dressed in sweats and a ragged T-shirt had just sat down across the waiting room from me. I knew she’d just quit smoking; I’d overheard what she’d said to the receptionist as she checked in for her doctor’s appointment. It didn’t occur to me to ask her about it; I was busy working on sermon ideas as I waited for my annual physical. The person who did think to ask was an older African-American woman seated near us. She was dressed to the nines, elevating her obviously painful splinted hand.

“Yep,” the young woman replied. “It’s been three weeks.” I wondered whether the two knew each other; as the conversation ensued, I realized they didn’t. The older woman simply thought the young one deserved congratulations for a successful start on a daunting journey toward well-being.

I returned to my notebook and tried to come up with an idea for my sermon. What a strange thing, I thought, that the Magnificat is written as though all those wonderful things in it have already happened—as though the hungry have already been filled with good things and the lowly already lifted up.

I was getting nowhere with my sermon ideas, so I went back to eavesdropping. Another woman, maybe about my age, bundled up in a down jacket, had settled down in the row of chairs. It was clear she knew the woman with the hurting hand. “So how’s your grandma doing?” the older woman asked her. The woman answered, “They sent her home to die, you know. The doctor said she only had a few days to live. Well, it’s been six months and she’s still kicking.” They talked about Grandma’s spirit and toughness. “God is good,” the older woman said. “God is always working miracles,” her friend replied.

Now I was really listening. “That’s right.” The woman with the snazzy clothes started in on her own miracle story. “My brother—you know he’s got AIDS, and he’d just about given up. Stopped taking his meds. I got on the plane and flew down to Tennessee. “Don’t you go telling me you’re giving up.” I told him. “You start taking that medicine right now.” He did, and he gained thirty pounds just like that. Now he’s doing great.”

A young woman is acknowledged for her struggle to take care of herself. A grandma refuses to accept the verdict of the experts. A sister berates her brother into claiming his life is worth living. Isaiah prophesies: “The Spirit of the Lord God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives...” Mary sings: “My Soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in you, O God, my Savior... You have lifted up the lowly.”

The night before that eavesdropped conversation, I'd returned a phone call from Jim and Debbie Bachman, who run the Framingham Street Ministries. "It's time to work on our Memorial Service," Debbie reminded me. Each year, across the nation, communities gather on the longest night of the year to hold memorial services honoring people who died struggling with homelessness. For the last four years, we've held one on the downtown common in Framingham.

We talked about the order of worship and the bulletin. "I'll send you a list of names," Jim said. Then I heard his voice change. "There are seven this year." "Seven people who died homeless in Framingham this year?" I asked. I didn't remember reading about them in the paper. "Yeah." I am sure Jim knew all of them; he may have actually found some of them after they died.

I don't know why those seven people were homeless or how they died. The causes of homelessness are complex: unemployment, housing costs, lack of job skills, addiction and mental illness, histories of abuse and isolation. It is heart-breaking. And it is heart-healing to gather on Wednesday night to honor these seven people. The candles we light proclaim that their lives did matter. It is a message that folks like Jim and Debbie conveyed to those seven people while they were alive: you matter—to us, to God. You have worth. You deserve to be treated with dignity.

[Isaiah declares:] "The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of a faint spirit." [Mary rejoices:] "You have lifted up the lowly. You have filled the hungry with good things..."

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Later that evening I turned on the TV to catch the news. The lead story was something that hadn't been seen in decades: a protest march in Moscow. Young people and old people standing together, standing up to a government that rules with an iron fist. First the Arab Spring, then Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Oakland and Occupy Boston, and now Moscow. Ordinary people coming forward to speak up and speak out.

Every movement for change is risky—with uncertainty about whether things will actually get better or worse, with the potential for positive energy to be hijacked and twisted into a new abuse of power. It is risky, and what's happening is also undeniable. Something new emerging, all over the world.

Isaiah declares: "They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord... they shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations..." Mary exults: "My Spirit rejoices in you, O God. You have shown strength with your arm... You have brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly."

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Mary's soul burst forth in a hymn of praise, the Magnificat, when she learned that God had chosen her to bear the Savior. Her song was not just about future promise, but about what God had already done. By choosing her, a poor teenage girl in occupied Galilee, God had already lifted up the lowly. The promise was coming—the birth of a Savior who would turn the world upside-down--, and the promise was already fulfilled.

More than two thousand years later, we still await the promise—the promise of a world of hope and dignity for each person, a world where no child goes hungry and no one lives in fear. Every once in a while, we are reminded that even as we wait, the promise is already being fulfilled—in a waiting room conversation, in the lighting of candles, in people gathering on the streets of Moscow. Every once in a while, we are reminded that the promise is waiting for us to bring it to fulfillment.

The promise of a new world might be waiting for us to do something simple: taking a moment to congratulate a young woman who's trying to quite smoking. It might be calling us to go out of our way and out of our comfort zone: spending an hour standing outside in downtown Framingham on the longest night of the year. It might be calling us to big picture action: speaking up for those whose voices are not being heard, standing up to insist on real change. Every time we act in any way to affirm the dignity of our brothers and sisters, we are part of the promise fulfilled.

On Saturday, we will gather for a pageant to retell the Christmas story. It is a tender story about a family and a stable and shepherds and angels and kings. It is a daunting story about God turning the world upside down. On that one day of the year, Christmas Eve, we are invited to put on costumes to participate in the story. For the other 364 days of the year, we might not put on costumes, but we are still called to participate in the story—the story of God lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, the story of God, with our help, transforming our world. Amen.