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Advent III

Hope For Selfish Hearts
Luke 1:51b

In the first chapter of the gospel of Luke Mary takes center stage. Luke tells us that an angel appears directly to Mary in the light of day. A conversation takes place in which Mary learns the overwhelming news of her miraculous pregnancy. After hearing this news Mary travels to the Judean countryside to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is advanced in years and has surprisingly become pregnant. She will give birth to John the Baptist. When the cousins meet the story becomes a musical with Mary breaking into song.

At this moment we see Mary in a different light. She is no longer the passive recipient of God's favor. With this song she becomes God's messenger. The song she sings is no gushy lullaby. It proclaims the good news of how God intervenes to change the course of human history. This song is a revolutionary statement about God lifting up the vulnerable and bringing down those who are exalted in this world. She sings:

God has scattered the proud in
 in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful
 from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly (Luke 1:51-52)

We cannot hear these words today in Springfield, Illinois without thinking of a governor charged with selling a seat in the United States Senate. Because this Senate seat was vacated by our new President-elect this has become a major story in the national media. The most surprising element of this scandal is not that a governor of this state would do something unethical or illegal, but that this governor allowed himself to be caught saying what he said, "I've got this thing and its...golden, and...I'm just not giving it up for...nothing." That, as you know, is the sanitized version of what the governor said.

What fascinates me about these words is not simply whether they suggest that a crime was about to be committed. It seems to me that these words offer a window into the heart of our governor. They are clearly the words of a man who is focused less on the public interest than on his own personal interest. How humiliating it must be to have said something like that and have it secretly recorded and beamed all over the world. The judgment of God is a fearful business, "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts (Luke 1:51b)."

If we listen carefully to Mary's song we will understand that our governor is not the only one who has a selfish heart. Who among us would not be humiliated if words spoken privately in our worst moments were beamed all over the world? What these words would reveal about the spiritual condition of our hearts would likely be devastating. The theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has observed that spiritual maturity means understanding that we can never trust our own hearts. Our hearts are at best confused organs of sentimentality and self interest. They need the correction of scripture (Michael

Jenkins, *Advent Reflections From the Austin Seminary Community*, 2008). Mary's song reminds us of that truth.

The song that Mary sings is a surprising choice for an unmarried, pregnant teen to be singing. It is a song that belongs to the older women of the Bible who receive the unlikely gift of children when they are well beyond childbearing age. It is the song of Sarah the mother of Isaac. It is the song of Hannah the mother of Samuel. They sang to celebrate that God had brought life to wombs that were long dead. This was not Mary's condition.

Mary's choice of this song is for Luke a sign that in Jesus God is moving into the world in a new way. This is a strange and surprising form of grace which changes people from the inside out. This grace both judges and transforms our selfish hearts. It teaches us to yearn for God's priorities, bringing down our self-centered ambitions and lifting up our compassion for those in need. Mary's Advent promise is echoed in these words of a well known ordination hymn:

I will break their hearts of stone

[and] Give them hearts for love alone

("Here I Am Lord," Daniel L. Schulte, 1981).