

**GOD LIFTS UP THE LOWLY**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Dec. 17, 2017***  
***based on Luke 1:39-55***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of an Advent sermon series entitled, “God Turns the Tables.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

We may often get the feeling that we don’t really count for anything in this world. I was reminded of that reality during these past weeks as the tax plan was careening through Congress, and I was one of many leaders of churches and charities in America who were expressing concern to our Congress about the potential impact of the tax plan on charitable giving in America. You likely have not hear much about this in the news—perhaps because charities do not rank very high in public priorities—but the tax plan is expected to have a significant impact on charitable giving in future years, once the plan is in effect. Studies of the tax plan have projected a distinctly negative impact on charitable giving, because although in the plan charitable gifts will still be technically deductible, the plan changes things in such a way that for most middle class people, any tax benefit that they once received from charitable giving will be either eliminated or sharply reduced. Now of course in the church we would hope that people give simply out of commitment to Christ, no matter what the tax benefit; but nevertheless the change in tax law is expected to have a negative impact across our country on charitable giving, as the loss of a tax benefit is likely to lead some people to reduce the amount of their giving. The impact is expected to fall especially on small community charities, like food pantries and shelters, as well as local churches, that depend primarily on average sized gifts from middle class people. Nationwide, the projection is for about a \$13 billion dollar decline in annual charitable giving as a direct result of the tax plan. This of course would impact the kind of good that charities and churches are able to do in our community and world. So, as you might expect, all sorts of charitable organizations—the Salvation Army, United Way, and many others—were communicating over the past weeks with members of Congress, and all were bringing essentially the same message: not insisting on outright defeat of the tax plan but urging changes in it; and the changes encouraged by churches and charities had to do not only with the impact of the plan on charities themselves and the good they are able to do, but also with the tax plan’s direct impact on some low income people in our country in various circumstances. As chairperson of the finance committee in our East Ohio Conference, I was in the thick of this, sending communications to our Conference pastors and to our senators in Congress.

But in this process one thing became very clear to me—I am a nobody, particularly in comparison to the real power and money brokers in Washington. We like to think in the church that we have a voice in things—we even have a United Methodist building in Washington, right across from the U.S. Capitol. Pretty impressive. But hardly anyone was

actually listening to us. At one point, the Administrative Assistant to our Bishop forwarded to me a response that he received from Senator Rob Portman. It was exactly the same response that I had received—the stock response, word for word, which ignored our concern altogether. In the final tax plan, it appears that almost none of the recommendations brought by the nation’s charities were adopted.

So we are like Mary—tiny, powerless, of no account in relation to the real powers of the world. You likely have had multiple experiences like this in life—where you feel like a nobody. But this is why the story of Mary is so inspirational. When God determined to do the most extraordinary thing in all of human history—when God entered the world in Jesus—God chose to do so through the most ordinary of people. By working through Mary, a simple peasant girl, God showed that it is small, very ordinary people who in the end are the real locus of God’s work in the world. It may seem that the rich and powerful are calling the shots on this earth, but it is ordinary people—who are receptive to God’s power—who finally make the difference.

This is in fact a major theme throughout the Bible—that God does great things through small people. In the process, God continually turns the tables. The Egyptians in their day appeared all powerful; but God worked through the lowly people that they had enslaved. As the Israelites, after escaping from Egypt, entered into the Promised Land, they were opposed by powerful and vicious enemies; but God worked through average farmers—like Gideon, who was just a frightened peasant, but through whom God repelled an invading army, or David, a shepherd boy, who faced the champion Goliath. Likewise in New Testament days, Rome would appear more powerful than any preceding empire, but God would work through a carpenter’s son in Nazareth, whose gospel would be far greater than Rome. So Mary exclaimed, “God casts down the mighty from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly.” (Luke 1:52)

This message—that God acts through the small and the lowly—is wonderfully illustrated every December when our Children’s Choir puts on the children’s Christmas musical (at the 10:30 hour). Here we have little children proclaiming the sublime message of Christmas. And this is exactly how God works—through the little people in the world.

So we need not despair when it seems that we are of no account; for it is precisely through people who appear to be of no account that God’s great purposes unfold. Indeed when Mary lifted up the song that we call the Magnificat, which we heard in the gospel reading this morning, the heart of it was her perception that in spite of her smallness and her apparent weakness she was a part of a great story of God’s salvation. In that regard, she recalled a woman of faith who had lived centuries before her in Israel—Hannah, who likewise was lowly and poor, but through whom God did something extraordinary, bringing about, in miraculous fashion, the birth of the great prophet Samuel. At the time, Hannah broke forth in a song of praise to God, and now Mary had exactly that song in mind when she declared the words of the Magnificat. The song of Hannah began with a

word of praise to God, as Hannah said, “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.” (I Samuel 1:1) Mary began her song in the same way: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (Luke 1:46-47) Hannah went on to note how God reaches to the lowly; as she said, “God raises up the poor from the dust; God lifts up the needy from the ash heap . . . the hungry are filled” (I Samuel 2:5,8) Mary echoed that, saying, “God fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich empty away.” (Luke 1:53) Hannah noted that those who exalt themselves will end up being brought down; as she said, “Let not arrogance come from your mouth . . . the bows of the mighty are broken.” (I Samuel 2:3-4) Likewise Mary said, “God scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” (Luke 1:51) But both Hannah and Mary affirmed that those who look to God in humility and faith become a part of God’s saving work. As Hannah said, “God will guard the faithful . . . for not by human might does one prevail.” (I Samuel 2:9) And Mary proclaimed, “The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name!” (Luke 1:49)

It is significant that when Hannah and Mary lifted up these songs of praise, much of what they declared had yet to unfold. But they stood in faith and commitment, trusting that God’s purposes would indeed come to fulfillment. Today we are called likewise to put our trust in God and take our place in the story of God’s salvation. It may appear at times that we don’t count for much, but the Biblical story declares that we are of great value to God, and that it is through regular people like us that God is powerfully at work. So we can join with Hannah and Mary—we can live right now in faith, we can persevere in God’s work, we can have confidence that God’s purposes will surely unfold, and we can lift our praise to God.