

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent: Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55)

The Rev. Brooks Cato

There's an old line that says "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." There's a new scary virus, there's political pendulum swings, there's robber barons and shrinkflation and even a new Sacco & Vanzetti. Y'all've seen all this stuff about Luigi Mangione, right? Of course you have. Just about everyone who has something to say, has something to say about him. On the very off-chance you haven't, he's the one who allegedly killed the United Healthcare CEO on a New York sidewalk. "Allegedly," folks, 'cause just like everyone he's *supposed* to be innocent until proven guilty. But for this sermon, I'm not all that interested in whether or not he is guilty. I wanna look at what lies underneath. 'Cause from the moment the story broke, our country's been talking about wealth disparity in earnest. Wealth disparity isn't just about who has all the money. It's about what you can do with that money, what you're granted when you've got more money, the power and deference and influence that kind of money brings.

Sidebar: I'm not talking about the difference between the poverty line and a millionaire, though that's certainly worth talking about, too. I'm talking about the difference between everyone from below the poverty line up to those millionaire-next-door types on one side and billionaires on the other. Allow me a diversion to flesh out a sense of what we're talking about here. Let's say you really like oranges. You've got 10 of 'em, and you need a place to put 'em. A salad bowl'd work nicely. What about a thousand? You'd need the bed of a pick up for that. A million? Your average swimming pool should be plenty big enough. But a billion? You'd need an entire NFL stadium to hold that many oranges. See what I mean? A salad bowl, a pick up truck, and a swimming pool are obviously different sizes, but they're closer to each other than they are to the stadium, and the stadium's so much bigger it's almost unfathomable. That's a lot of oranges.

Let's try another example. It used to be that a robust retirement account needed a million dollars. These days, it's closer to two million. That's a life's worth of work and saving and dipping into the fund for emergencies and then saving some more, and even then, maybe you get there, maybe you don't. I know a schoolteacher down south who retired fairly recently, and she never got paid more than \$30,000 a year. With 30 years of service if she never spent any of her paychecks on anything--including taxes--her income still would've been shy of the million dollar mark by a hundred grand. Elon Musk makes up that difference in less than two and a half minutes. Were he the benevolent type, he could've covered her entire retirement in less than half an hour. Did you know he could buy up all the used cars in America and still have \$44 billion left over?

Maybe you're still not seeing it. Today we're hearing a lot about Mary. To save a billion dollars with no expenses, Mary the Mother of Jesus would've needed to save \$500,000 every year until right now to get to a billion, but with a measly one billion dollars she'd still only be the 2,782nd richest person on the planet. A million is a lot; a billion is more than my brain can comprehend.

I remember a time between college and my first grown-up job. I'd saved a little from every paycheck I'd ever received before then 'cause that's what you're supposed to do. It took three or four months to land that job, though, so I burned through that savings on extravagant expenses like rent and groceries. I started working two weeks before I got paid, of course, and I knew down to the penny how close I was to emptying out my bank account. I figured out exactly how much I could stand to spend and had it reckoned perfectly so that my first paycheck would land just in time. All good, right? Well, here's the thing. The bank I used required a minimum balance. I didn't know that, so when my careful spending dipped below that minimum requirement, the bank automatically withdrew a fee. That fee was large enough to make my account overdrawn, which also came with a fee--a fee I couldn't pay--so that resulted in a third fee. Maybe I should've known, but I never imagined I'd get fined by the institution that was supposedly helping me save money for not having saved enough money.

Unfortunately, that example's mild. I just read a feel-good story about a kid who put up a lemonade stand and raised tens of thousands of dollars so his little sister could get her leukemia treatments. The comments were full of people just like me gushing over the heartwarming story, but one, tongue firmly planted in cheek, simply observed, "Isn't it lovely that in the greatest country on Earth, a child has to raise money to pay for another child's medical bills?" We've gotten so accustomed to living in that world that it's taken Luigi and The CEO to show the cracks in the system. His overall justification -- not the gun, not the shooting, not the bag full of monopoly money -- it all comes down to the injustice that the unimaginably wealthy live in a different world by a different set of rules than the rest of us. Truth be told, the systemic responses only serve to illustrate his point further. There's roughly one murder a day in New York City. How many have we heard about? How many got 100 officers assigned to the case? How many came with a terrorism charge? Did y'all know that the NYPD's bounty for Luigi was 3 times higher than normal? Governor Hochul hosted a therapy session for CEOs and high-powered business people in an ironic example of state-provided healthcare. The NYPD even opened a special 911 hotline just for CEOs. Did you see the pictures of Luigi's perp walk that came out Thursday? He's shackled in a prisoner's orange jumpsuit surrounded by heavily armed officers, detectives, even the mayor of New York City. There were more guarding him than Timothy McVeigh, the Unabomber, and the Boston Marathon Bomber had combined. Y'all there was a Superman movie made in 2013 where he was arrested, and even Superman required a smaller armed escort. Where's this energy been for the never-ending succession of school shooters? Did y'all even know there was another shooting last week? In Wisconsin, two kids and a teacher died, and I almost missed it because so much of the world's focused on the death of a single CEO. I'm not saying his life wasn't worth anything, it's just, y'all, the inconsistency is baffling. Or maybe it's the overwhelming consistency that's baffling. The plutocratic system's trying harder than I've ever witnessed to convince normal people that the world is just, but every step they take further illustrates just how unjust it really is.

Now, I know we're close to Christmas. I wanna talk about cookies and presents and cross my fingers for a safe and snowy Eve. But I'm realizing this year just how little of the Christmas story actually takes us to those chipper places. Yes, we get angels heard on high and shepherds tending flocks by night. There's a sweet family, a tale of hospitality, unexpected gifts from afar. I'm pretty sure Bing Crosby was one of the original pieces of our creche. But that stuff's not the whole story. Now that cracks are showing in the system, I'm noticing cracks in more and more places. No one should be surprised to learn that the wealthy use their power to influence normal people, but with just how effective they've been (and maybe even with just how many of us accept that influence) this year Christmas feels different. But maybe it shouldn't. Looking back to our scriptures and the stories they tell, the CEOs, the billionaires, the ruling classes of millenia past and the injustices they perpetuated were the focus of prophet after prophet all the way up to and including John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ.

This is part of why that beautiful song "Mary, Did You Know?" rubs me the wrong way. First off, yes, Mary knew. That was the whole point of the Angel Gabriel, and Elizabeth with her leaping belly, too. Yes, she knew. But she knew more than what that song asks. "Mary, Did You Know?" focuses on miracles. Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water? Give sight to the blind? Calm a storm, heal the deaf, raise the dead? All impressive, all feel-good stories. But I want you to hold that song written in 1984 by a comedian in tension with Mary's Song written two thousand years ago from the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Luke. We all said it together, so I'm not gonna recite it in full, but I want you to notice something. The first half's nice and miraculous, complete with heartwarming recognition of God's mercy. But it doesn't stay there. It turns to the whole purpose of this Jesus guy. Mary knows the child she carries'll do more than miracles and nice stories. Just by coming into the world the way he does, he upsets the social order. She also knows what God's doing, has done by making this so. She sings, "He has scattered the proud 'in the

imagination of their hearts,” as Rite I has it. “He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” He’ll do all that and more, and he’ll tell us to do the same. You better believe Mary knows.

Most years, I prefer looking toward the “rejoicing in God my Savior” part. But with all the rhyming histories swirling around, I’m learning more of what hope means. There’s the one side I’m most familiar with, the hope for coming peace, joy, and love. But lately, there’s another hope springing up, a hope for suffering to end, for injustices to be made right, for fairness and ease and a time when existing as a normal person doesn’t come with everyday battles for basic human rights. There’s a deep comfort knowing that our scriptural foundations don’t condemn that longing. In fact, they promise that those hopes will come to fruition. This is no opiate calming otherwise revolutionary spirits. We recall these scriptures every year not to ease the tension but because we need reminding every year that the fullness of our story includes scattering the proud, casting down the mighty, even feeding the hungry at the expense of the horribly wealthy. You don’t have to agree with the Luigi Mangiones of the world, but maybe the Holy Spirit’s blowing a little when moments like that unfold at the same time scriptures like these get read. If History rhymes, maybe scripture does, too. Our calendar certainly does. Maybe our calls for justice can, too. And yes, Mary knew. The real question is, do you?