

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 15, 2019 – Rejoice Isaiah 35:1-4c, 5-8d and Luke 1:46b-55

There is a region in Northwestern Spain on the Atlantic coast above Portugal called Galicia. The land there is lush and mountainous “peppered with oak, chestnut, eucalyptus and cultivated pine forests.”¹ Galicia is “far removed from the tourist-filled beaches of Spain’s Mediterranean coast.” Remote and tranquil, it is also struggling to retain residents.²

“Like much of rural Spain, the province saw huge portions of its population immigrate to Latin America between 1850 and 1950, as part of an exodus of an estimated 3.5 million Spaniards who crossed the Atlantic to work in the fields and factories of Spanish-speaking Argentina, Cuba and Uruguay.”³ That trend continues today.

In fact, since 2001, “three-quarters of Galicia’s municipalities have witnessed a population decrease.” Rural areas of Spain, in particular, have experienced “the steady flow of its younger generation toward major cities and other European Union

¹ <https://fortune.com/2019/07/14/real-estate-spain-depopulation-villages-rural/>. Accessed on December 10, 2019.

² Spain.

³ Spain.

states. In leaving the country, they're escaping the national under-25 unemployment rate" of nearly 35%.

In these remote, Northwestern villages, the few, mainly older people who remain recall a time when others were present. A time when homes were inhabited and shops were open for business. Those hoping to repopulate them now are faced with a daunting challenge, compounded by Spain's fertility rate, the second-lowest in the EU, with 1.3 children born per woman. ⁴ Most of the properties in Galicia have fallen into disrepair, and scores of these neglected villages can be purchased in their entirety. ⁵

Ancient Galilee in Palestine was also a rural, rolling landscape. In Nazareth, the small village where Mary lived, cave-like homes were often carved into hillsides. In the absence of reliable work, affordable housing is a must. And these cave dwellings were more cost effective, requiring fewer or, in some cases, no purchased or processed materials to build. ⁶

⁴ Spain.

⁵ Spain.

⁶ Jessica Renee Patchett, "Love: What Are You Waiting For?" *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2019), 25.

“Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian from the Galilee, writes about 45 towns in the region and never mentions Nazareth. The Talmud, the collected writings from Jewish rabbis in the ancient world, mentions 63 towns in Galilee, but never mentions Nazareth.”⁷ Jesus’ boyhood home was all but forgotten – hence the question: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Not far from Nazareth was an oft-mentioned town called Sepphoris, which served as the financial and cultural capital of the region in Jesus’ time. It had great schools, a bustling market, beautiful villas with mosaic floors, and jobs.”⁸ Sepphoris was a place where laborers like Joseph and Jesus could secure an honest day’s work before returning home.

But just because they worked in the city doesn’t mean that laborers preferred the way of life there. Even today, people who live in tiny villages recognize some of the downfalls of city life. They know of people who spend their lives racing from one obligation to the next and who fail to take the time to make meaningful connections with others. And they are familiar with those who have compromised their values for financial gain.

⁷ Patchett, 25.

⁸ Patchett, 25.

Mary may have been a poor girl who grew up on a hillside; perhaps even a poor girl who grew up *in* a hillside; “a teenage bride betrothed to a local man likely her elder; and almost certainly illiterate with no formal education.”⁹ But, she was also a proud Nazorean. One who recognized that many good things came from her hometown. Mary understood what it means to have loving parents and kind neighbors. In her town were many people “who walked humbly with their God and who watched for good things to grow in unexpected places.”¹⁰

You may recall that the book of Isaiah contains “images of a frail shoot, a broken blade of grass, and a barely smoldering candle wick.” Each represents precarious signs of life.¹¹ Each is a reminder that “God can do so much with so little.”¹² And here, in the story of Mary, we find the continuation of that narrative. For, at Christmas, “love was reborn into the life of a young, illiterate woman.”¹³

It’s always fascinating how the holy family is depicted. Often, their clothes are pristine. Their hair is perfect. Their features are attractive. But, in reality, Mary “had no form or majesty that we should look at her, nothing in her appearance that

⁹ Patchett, 25

¹⁰ Pratchett, 25.

¹¹ Leanne Van Dyk, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 19.

¹² Van Dyk, 19.

¹³ Patchett, 27.

we should desire to be like her. Or rather, there was nothing in her appearance that we should desire to be like her until Gabriel said, ‘Mary, God loves you beyond measure, will be kind to you, and has a very important role for you in the history of the world.’ And after that, when people have seen the face of Mary, we have seen the face of God.”¹⁴

A frail shoot. A broken blade of grass. A barely smoldering candle wick. A tiny infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. Today, we rejoice at the coming of our Lord, and remember the one who was chosen to bear the Son of God, giving thanks that God is able to do so much with so very little. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁴ Patchett, 27.