

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 24, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: Micah 5:2-5a, Psalm – Luke 146b-55, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-47*

A few weeks ago, Nathan and I were in Target, and we were going by the Christmas tree display, and there was a tree there that was upside-down. An artificial tree, of course, just put together in the opposite order, with the long branches attached at the top, and the short branches attached at the bottom. I didn't think too much about it at the time, except maybe, "Boy, someone really screwed up putting that tree together, maybe they left it that way as a joke." But, no. That is the way that tree is supposed to be.

You, see, this year, someone decided to try to market an upside-down Christmas tree. According to the item I was reading on-line about it, the idea is that with an upside-down tree, all your ornaments will be fully visible, all hanging down without any lower branches to get in its way. And, and this one's the biggie, there will be more room under the tree for presents.

I almost can't find the words to express all the reasons there is something profoundly wrong with that. Clearly, the message is that what is important about Christmas is the decorations and the presents. Lots of decorations and lots of presents. Here is the tree for the family that is so affluent that they are going to have so many presents that the normal tree just can't cut it. Here is the tree that enables folks who already have a lot, to have more. Something's seriously wrong here.

By comparison, there is something profoundly right about God's way of turning things upside-down. Our texts today, especially the texts from Micah and Luke, are some instances of God turning things upside down. God takes things that are little, seemingly unimportant, like the little town of Bethlehem, just a poor village, in a poor country. God takes folks who are unlikely choices, like a young maiden, and an old woman, to bear children. And God says, from you shall come the Savior, the King, the Prince of Peace.

God turns things upside down with the promise that the poor will have more, and the rich will have less. The proud and mighty will be brought down, and the lowly will be lifted up.

God takes the things, the people, the places that don't amount to much in the eyes of the world and God uses them to change the world. A good example of that is the winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize. He changed the world for lots of poor people, mostly poor women, by giving them micro-loans of \$10 and \$20, so they could start businesses, so they could provide for themselves and their families.

I haven't seen any big investment bankers, the ones who bankroll even more low-wage, high-pollution factories in third-world countries, win any Nobel Peace prizes lately. And I am guessing the day will come when the mighty get brought down a notch or two.

I think Emanuel is a good example of that as well. Someone commented to me how after the trees were cut down for the construction, you could see the church from Ross Ave.

much more . And how when that person looked over at the building, it looked pretty little, and kind of plain, at least from the back.

But from this church God does some pretty amazing things: like the Carnival, the Food Pantry and the Angel Tree program.. We do the Summer Reading program, and the Vaccination program. Which, by the way, is starting to become known in the community. The other day I had my first instance of a mom, come looking for the free clinic, so word is spreading.

But even more than the social programs, this church has impact on those who gather here for worship. Emanuel is a spiritual home. It is a place where people can share their lives and their struggles and receive the support borne of Christian love for one another. We bear witness to what can happen when people who are different come to praise God, to hear the Word, and the break bread. Emanuel is a place where we live out the Kingdom of God. It is a place where everyone is respected and welcomed, whether we look alike, think alike, or act alike, or not. We work together to love and serve our neighbors, our community.

We are a witness to others, as we try to keep our hearts and minds open to what God would do through us next. My guess is that God will continue to use us, a pretty small church in a not-so-good part of town, to lift up the lowly, and fill the hungry with good things. That's just how God works, turning things upside down, using the least powerful and least likely ones to do the big, world-changing things.

And tonight, we will gather again to remember and celebrate the most important, most world-changing case of God turning things upside down. When God came into the world, as a baby, born in a stable. God came as a human being who would change human history, who would change our relationship with God. This little newborn baby would turn out to be the one who gives us hope, who calls us to faith, who commands us to love, and who shows us the way of peace.

Let it be so, among us, again. Amen.