“***Scattered the Proud***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 22, 2019

**Isaiah 11:1–4**

1A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

**Luke 1:39–53**

39 Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me. . .

51 “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

This is Mary speaking! She says the Mighty One has done great things. What has God done, or what *will* God do? God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, and sent the rich away empty! What a radical Mary is! There’s no mistaking that she is here advocating for the poor, and excoriating the proud, the powerful, the arrogant, and the rich.

Of course, this is not *our* politics, but it *is* first century political or social commentary. I find it most helpful to discuss it in connection with the biblical hope that she had in mind. She is repeating the sentiments of Isaiah, first from chapter 2: “The Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high. . . The haughtiness of people shall be humbled” (2:12, 17), and then, from chapter 13, “I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants” (13:11). These hopes are also echoed in the prophets Amos, Micah, and Jeremiah. They all spoke out against the arrogance of rulers, both Jewish and Gentile, who exploited the poor, bragged about their power, and mistreated prisoners. Mary’s speech, which seems like a poem, repeats these values and puts a particular emphasis on God lifting up the lowly (v. 52).

And now let’s glance at Isaiah 11, which was read earlier. This is a bold prophecy of a coming one who will judge with equity for the meek, and justice for the poor, guided by evidence. I find the first verse very interesting, since it could be interpreted as referring to seven spirits that work together for one purpose: the spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of might, the spirit of knowledge, and the spirit of the fear of the Lord (v. 2). Now, the text probably does not intend seven *distinct* spirits, since it has some pairs, such as “the spirit of wisdom and understanding.” Still, if one diagrams the sentence, one can get seven spirits, which is echoed later in Revelation “the seven spirits who are before his throne” (Rev 1:4; see 3:1; 4:5).

What matters for Isaiah is that the Messiah will have these spiritual powers and will practice justice and equity. Mary speaks of “God my Savior” (v. 47) rather than explicitly of the Messiah, but she is clearly anticipating a Messianic Age, when the powerful will no longer trample on “the poor of the earth,” to use another common biblical expression.

What I want to emphasize, more than the economic side of Mary’s hope, is the hope for a Messianic Age. This is the profound hope that filled Jewish hearts, and which manifested in different details for different folks. For Mary, it was the hope for a reversal of fortunes between the powerful and the poor. For others it took the form of a hope for world peace, for an end to strife, for worldwide justice. There were different manifestations of the underlying hope.

What I think is most important is how Jesus embodied the highest spiritual hopes of the Jews. It is important to add the word “spiritual,” for he did *not* embody the political hopes, such as that popular desire for a new king who would pound the Gentiles, and drive out the Romans. Nor did he embody the more fussy priestly hopes that some people had: the desire for a perfectionist priest who would keep everybody in line, adults and children alike, observing outward rules of behavior and dress, who would enforce ritual purity on every aspect of life. But Jesus *did* embody the prophetic hope for a healer, a teacher, a motherly figure who would nurture people, and a fatherly figure who would instruct and protect. He would have taken Jerusalem under his wing, like a mother hen (Luke 13:34). He would have led them courageously, as a Prince of Peace and a just leader.

He showed no favoritism for rich or poor, for Jew or Gentile, for male or female, for grown-up or child; he ministered to them all. He spoke kindly to poor widows and to a rich young ruler. He offered salvation to unpopular tax collectors and to respected Pharisees, without distinction. He spoke to Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, and Jews. He was compassionate to those who worked hard, saying “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28 RSV), yet his parable of the talents shows respect for those who need to invest and make a profit on their investment (Luke 19:12–24). He could be strict, but also (and more often) generous: “Take heart, daughter; your faith has saved you” (Matt 9:22; combining NRSV and NABRE). He could describe discipleship as freedom (“The truth will set you free,” John 8:32 NIV) or as a yoke and a burden, yet he would say “my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:30).

Jesus was a balanced person, moral but not moralistic in the snobby and judgmental sense. He was serious, but injected humor into his lessons; was kind, but not indulgent towards wrongdoing. In fact, we could return to that image of seven spirits to describe balanced character, and we could see them all in Jesus. You could say that the spirits of wisdom, of might, and of the fear of the Lord represent conservative values, and that the spirits of understanding, of counsel, and of knowledge represent liberal values, while the spirit of the Lord stands for both. My point is that the balanced character of Jesus fulfills the deepest of the Old Testament hopes, and I’d say the deepest spiritual instincts that you and I have.

We look at Jesus and we have to say “behold the man!” (John 19:5 RSV), or with John we say “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16), or with Paul we say “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9). And it *is* appropriate to say that Jesus’ perfection stands in contrast to the hypocrisy and greed of the proud and tyrannical, and that his *way*, his truth, whenever it prevailed, “scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts” (Luke 1:51). It fills the spiritually hungry hearts, and sends the pompous and self-satisfied away empty. It puts to shame the proud, and lifts up the lowly.

And this affects *our* lives, because we have no better model for living and loving, than Jesus. In Jesus, we see what God is like. In Jesus we affirm our hope for justice, and look for ways to practice fairness and love.