

## Birthing a Rebel

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Isaiah 61:10-62:4, 10-12  
January 1, 2012

Luke 2:22-40  
Midland UCC

This first day of the year 2012 is also the eighth day of Christmas, which means we are just a little more than half way through the Christmas season. Christmas actually ends this coming Thursday. There is, of course, a song about the 12 days of Christmas which has been often parodied and for which at least one group of economists estimates the annual cost. This Christmas it would cost you over \$100,000 to provide the various gifts for your true love. Today's gift would be 8 maids a milking. I wonder how many people in our society know what a "maid a milking" is? I wonder if hand milked milk would pass governmental approval and be sold at the supermarket. The song seems to have originated in England in 1780. I imagine that 232 years ago 8 maids a milking would have been a considerable economic asset to a dairy farmer. It is quite likely that by now the 8 maids have been replaced by one machine, made in China and imported through Indonesia.

A couple of weeks ago I got one of those email ads selling me a special external hard drive for my computer on which I am supposed to store my pictures and other treasures to pass on to my family. The advertisement claims that this

special little external computer drive will last for 100 years and will keep my treasures safe. Aside from wondering how the company could claim to have tested this device to prove it would last 100 years and also from wondering how I could follow up on the warranty in 100 years, I found myself wondering if there will be computers as we know them, especially with USB ports which this device needs, in 100 years—after all 100 years ago there were no such things. So with all these tidbits in mind, I decided that there isn't really any future in forecasting the future on the first day of 2012.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning, however, contains some forecasting of the future that I feel is important for us to understand. I want to invite you to step away from some of the traditional pageantry of Christmas for a few minutes in order to shift our perspective on our own history. The idea that Jesus was born of a virgin didn't really gain much historical traction until Christianity was over 300 years old. The reality at the time of Jesus' birth was that his mother was pregnant out of wedlock and that Joseph had some concerns about marrying her. The shepherds who came to worship the infant were considered to be unclean and thus excluded from common religious practices. Hanging out with shepherds was clearly not something that socially proper folk would have done. Nazareth had an ugly reputation—it was not a good town. Another reality is that the wise men

didn't show up at the stable at all. They arrived at Mary's, Joseph's and Jesus' house about two years later. Imagine the harried mother of a two year old having three kings descend on her! Today's gospel lesson describes Mary and Joseph as devout Jews who took their baby to the temple for presentation to God. They encountered two prophets there: Simeon, presumably an old man, and Anna who was 84 years old. It is amazing that Anna had lived that long since the median life expectancy for a woman at that time was 38. It is also astounding from our perspective that Anna is identified as a prophet. For centuries we have been assuming that prophets were men. Luke wants people to be able to identify this woman, so he tells us her father's name and also their tribe. Simeon is delighted to be a witness to this event and says that his life purpose has been fulfilled now that he has seen the infant Jesus. Simeon is said to be "in the spirit"—in other words he might appear to be possessed or in an ecstatic state, most likely an off-putting way of presenting himself. Many of us would at least raise an eyebrow if we told them that God talks to us. Yet Simeon also sounds a word or two of caution: he says that "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and (he says to Mary) a sword will pierce your own soul too." This last remark is sometimes understood to be a reference to the

fact that Mary probably outlived her son and may have witnessed his execution. Certainly the way Jesus' life unfolded would not be every mother's dream for her babies.

The entire Christmas story is a counter-cultural experience. Among the poor is born a king; out of the riff-raff of the underclass comes a revolutionary whose entire life will challenge and upset many powerful people. The unclean and the outcasts will be welcomed. Even the lepers will be loved. This Jesus will stand the value systems of his time on their heads. His behavior was so radical that even his family came on one occasion to take him home because they said "he is beside himself"---in other words out of his mind. One of my personal problems with the way we celebrate Christmas is that it feels to me like we have succeeded in domesticating Jesus—making him socially acceptable. I doubt that we would find an encounter with Jesus to be a soothing, pleasant experience. We would be more likely to see him as a ragged non-conformist who seems to be, as the saying goes, "a pickle short of a full jar." We would certainly find him to be a challenging and demanding presence who has no concern with being proper or doing things in good order. Even being socially appropriate might be unimportant to him.

I know that I have quoted George Bernard Shaw to this congregation before, but I still think this quotation of his fits Jesus and helps us to see the challenge before us. Shaw said: “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” Jesus is the unreasonable man. Mary and Joseph, that non-conformist couple from the most unlikely community and background, had, on Christmas Day, an unreasonable son. The two prophets at the temple, Simeon and Anna, celebrate his unreasonableness.

Isaiah’s call to prepare the way of the Lord becomes a call to make a highway for the Unreasonable One. Simeon tells us that the Unreasonable One will be opposed by many and his manifestation will cause the fall and rise of many in Israel. It is quite tempting for us to see this as a reference to the fall of those in power and the rise of the powerless—in other words the coming of the kingdom of God will wreak social havoc. However these prophets stop short of making predictions as to the form that the future will take. They know that the new life associated with the kingdom of God can only happen when the current ways of injustice, discrimination, and violence are out of the way. They witness to the

hope but leave the details to be accomplished by those who will follow them by following the Unreasonable One.

On the table before us wait the communion elements. The bread and drink here are symbols of the body and blood—of the life—of the Unreasonable One. When we partake of these elements today we are invited—in fact we are challenged—to incorporate into our own lives the perspective and attitude of the Unreasonable One. In bygone days, the church was sometimes described as Mother Church. I invite us to reclaim that role, to become as Mary—the poor, rejected, unwed mother—and do whatever we need to do to give birth to rebels, to give new life to the Unreasonable One in our midst that from this place and from among this people will go forth a challenge to the whole world to turn its unjust value systems upside down, to welcome everyone, to offer healing and support and care to all regardless of their circumstances. May we find the courage to be counted among the colleagues of the Unreasonable One, dare to go to the Nazareths of our own time, and risk hanging out with the socially unacceptable. Let us have the courage to be found in places, with people, and doing things which no reasonable folk would consider to be proper. Let our New Year's resolution be to become Unreasonable Ones; let our predictions for the coming year focus on refurbishing and changing value systems until all find

themselves included in a socially just society. Thanks be to God for the power of the Unreasonable One, our brother, in whose company we will spend the rest of our lives.