



Downwardly Mobile

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Matthew 2 & Luke 1 & 2

Maria got the news that she was pregnant when she was young and single, and before she was feeling ready to become a mother, and while she was still trying to get her life together and get a plan for her future.

Maria's parents were the conventional type. They had fairly traditional expectations of their children. They had hoped that their children would get more education, and have better jobs than they had had. They imagined that their children would marry later, have children later, and raise bright, attractive, and successful grandchildren. Maria's parents imagined that their offspring would enjoy better health and longer lives, and that they would be able to care for them in their old age.

In short, Maria's parents envisioned their children as "upwardly mobile"—as repeating the pattern of social and economic betterment with each successive generation, which has been the norm in our nation since it was founded. Like the theme song from the 1970s TV sit com, *The Jeffersons*, Maria's parent envisioned themselves and their children as "movin' on up."

So learning that their first-born child, a daughter, was pregnant out of wedlock was not the plan that Maria's parents had for any of their children, especially not their eldest, whom they had counted on to set the pace for the rest of their offspring.

To say that the parents were beside themselves at the news that their eldest was about to become a mother and that they were about to become grandparents, is an understatement.

Still, despite their disappointment at the news that their daughter's life and their own were headed on a new trajectory, Maria's parents were not inclined to disown their child, or suggest that the pregnancy be terminated. So they did what people in their family and culture do when things aren't going well with one of their children—they sent Maria off to live with her Aunt Beth for a while. This temporary solution helped reduce the strain on family relationships, and gave everyone time to prepare for the future.

II

Being the aunt of two young adult nieces, I appreciate this move. There was a time when my now young adult nieces were teenagers, a time when I was not only on my twin sister's speed-dial, but a time when she pushed "call Arlene" pretty much every day for a couple of years. As you might imagine, Marlene wasn't calling to report on how well things were going with her daughters, particularly the oldest one.

Sometimes the girls would call me, too, and when I went to visit them in Arkansas, we would have little chats about how things were going—about how their mother was doing with them growing up, having their own ideas about things, and being their own persons.

I mined their ideas for wisdom that might be gently shared with my sister, and tried to play the part of a foreign diplomat, by explaining to the girls where their mother's hair-brained ideas came from, and that she wasn't just whistling "Dixie" or making up stuff to worry about when she cautioned them about certain things. I explained further that she was speaking from experience; and that if they wanted to know more about her life experience, they should ask her and not me.

More than once I was accused of sounding "just like Mom."

"Really?" I said, and then gently reminded them that their mother and I were twins, and that twins have psychic "twin powers," which came from being raised by the same people under the same roof at the same point in time.

Sometimes it seemed that my version of "what Mom said" had a slightly better than a snowball's-chance-in-Haiti of getting through to them, because my messages were delivered at a distance from the heated situation in which the first salvo was launched; and because, well, sometimes it just helps not to be "the mom," and to merely play one on TV.

I'm happy to say that we all weathered the girls' growing up years, and that their mother mellowed as they fledged, and that everyone is on very good terms now. There is nothing, as some of you know, like having to make your own meals, pay your own bills, deal with your own children, and run your own ranch to help you appreciate your parents.

After the first semester of college had ended for my oldest niece, and she was home acting like a changed person, my sister observed, "If we had known college was going to be so good for Susie, we would have sent her a long time ago."

III

I'm also happy to report that, in the end, things turned out better for Maria and her parents after she spent some time with her Aunt Beth. During that time, Maria's parents found some support for themselves, peeled themselves off the ceiling, and reinvented themselves as grandparents.

Maria similarly began to reimagine her life in a more focused and positive way—even though the challenges of motherhood and life in general seemed daunting at times.

Maria's parents and Maria herself were right to be concerned about the future. Studies have shown that teen parenting is one of the strongest correlates associated with lifelong poverty in our nation.

IV

Teenage parenting has always presented a formidable challenge for individuals and couples in terms of economic and social advancement. But today, for people my age and younger, there are an increasing number of hurdles that forestall the fulfillment of American parents' Jefferson-like hopes for their children—hopes that their children will move on up.

The overarching challenges that confront younger generations have to do with the decline in economic productivity and the deteriorating infrastructure in our nation.

Paul A. Light predicted what some now call “downward mobility” in his 1988 book *Baby Boomers*. There he explained that the generation that would follow Boomers (a.k.a. “Busters”) would be the first to earn less and work more than our parents or any previous generation in the nation.¹

A similar specter was recently raised by Robert Samuelson in his October 10, 2011 op-ed piece, in the *Washington Post* titled “Why our children's futures no longer look so bright.”

Watching several hardworking, well-educated people in the younger generations lose their jobs, homes, and familiar standard of living in the past few years has put faces on the statistics and theories that I've read about over the years.

V

With all this doom and gloom prognostication, with the lived experience of people in our congregation and community who are intimately acquainted with downward mobility, we may wonder if there's any good news for us this Christmas.

My answer is a resounding, “Yes!”

¹ http://www.amazon.com/Baby-Boomers-Light-Paul/dp/0393306399/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1324762795&sr=8-2-fkmr0

The good news this Christmas—and every Christmas—is that we worship a God who is downwardly mobile: We worship a God who descends from the lofty heavens and who is present with us now in the midst of our earthly struggles.

God is present with us as a spiritual guide as we strive to “invent” and “reinvent” ourselves, regardless of whether we are teenage parents or high-powered executives.

God is present with us in the ears of empathetic peers who listen and try to help us discern when is the right time to give the keys to our teenagers and take them away from our parents.

God is present with us even now in our struggle for social and economic justice, whether we are lesbian mothers trying to raise our children in a homophobic world, or undocumented parents looking for work in an inhospitable nation.

The good news this Christmas, regardless of our social location, is that Christmas is about a God who abandons the heavens and descends to earth. Christmas is about a God who seeks us out in our lowest moments and our lowest places—and finds us. And Christmas is about a God who raises us up, and invites us into the life-changing, justice-seeking ministry of Jesus.

Merry Christmas. Amen.