In 410 AD after the Visigoths had sacked the city of Rome, many of the survivors were left trying to understand how something like this could have happened – how Barbarians could have conquered mighty Rome. Some of the old guard placed the blame squarely on Christianity, believing that Rome had abandoned the strong gods of antiquity and taken up with the weak God of Christianity, who was unable to protect them from the marauding hordes. Such criticisms of Christianity are not unique. For example, the 19th century philosopher and syphilitic Friedrich Nietzsche said, “Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, failed; it has made an ideal out of whatever contradicts the preservation instincts of a strong life.” To put it briefly these criticisms of Christianity say that with its care and even exultation of the less fortunate, Christianity corrupts society in such a way that it is not able to vanquish every foe. Before we get to addressing the specifics of this criticism, I should probably tell you why I bring it up in the first place. And the reason I do is because of what we read from Mary in today’s Gospel where in the Magnificat she says among other things, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” We can debate how literally we are supposed to take these statements but what I don’t think we can debate is the topsy turvy nature of God’s kingdom. The strong are brought down and the weak are lifted up.

I think we have talked about this before but some of what the pagan religions like those of Rome did was reinforce the power structures on earth. If you were rich or powerful it was because the gods wanted you to be rich and powerful and if you were poor and weak it was because the gods wanted you to be poor and weak. It was instantaneous judgment and reward of your nature. So, when Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that the poor are blessed it would have cut against what Roman religion taught. To the Roman religion of the day, it was obvious that the poor were not blessed because they were poor. The answer was right there in front of you. But if, as we do in Christianity exalt the poor and weak, we are making a claim that God sees things differently than what might be obvious here on earth. We say that the blessings we see on earth may not necessarily be divinely ordained. And while I am sure you know who I believe to be right in this argument let’s take a moment and dig a bit deeper.

It is probably best to think about a religion of the strong in Darwinian terms, i.e., the survival of the fittest. Those like the Romans and Nietzsche who despise Christianity for its apparent weakness are looking for a religion that doubles as a selective breeding program. You want to encourage the strong and discourage the weak. The poor, the sick, the lame and handicapped are slowing down the advance of the top performers in society – they are ballast preventing our balloon from rising high enough. So the undesirables must be left behind because their very existence threatens the progress of the good and the great. It is like the old joke that if you are being chased by a bear you don’t have to be faster than the bear just faster than whoever you are with. In a religion of the strong, there are the fast and there are those who are bear food.

And in a purely logical world the argument kind of makes sense. You give the most resources to those who are best equipped to use them. You feed the strong and let the weak pass away. This idea is not dead by any means. In fact, it caught on in much of the western world in the late 1800’s under a civil religion known as eugenics (literally good birth). The Stanford Encyclopedia of History describes it as a movement which had its start with the British scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin, Francis Galton “[who] was interested in ‘improving human stock’ through scientific management of mating; his explicit goal was to create better humans. His ideas were taken up widely in the early part of the 20th century by seemingly well-intended scientists and policy makers, particularly in the United States, Britain, and the Scandinavian countries. Notable eugenicists included Alexander Graham Bell and Margaret Sanger.” The movement stayed popular until 1945 when the ramifications of such ideas were laid bare in the death camps of Nazi Germany and its previous supporters were shamed into distancing themselves from such projects or at least give them new names like the American Eugenics Society which changed its name to the Society for the Study of Social Biology. Sadly, it took Birkenau to make many see the folly of this strong religion. So, why do we ultimately recoil at seeing the logical conclusion of the strong religion? What is it that goes beyond logic and reason that tells us to take care of the poor and the weak? When Mary came to understand that God was coming to earth, why was her reaction to tell how God extols the lowly and weak?

Here is at least part of the explanation and I base this explanation on two scriptures. The first comes from Genesis where it says, “God created man in his own image.” Being created in God’s image means we have the potential to possess God’s characteristics. And one of those characteristics is illustrated in Psalm 8 which states, “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” In human terms this means we are to take care of those who might be seen as lower than us – those who might be poorer, less intelligent or not as physically capable. Because, if the creator of heaven and earth concerns himself with us, who are quite obviously much lessor, we feel that same pull, the pull to take care of the people that are less well off than us. But there is a problem and it is much the same problem that Mary had when making this pronouncement in the Roman Empire. We live in a world that also does not see the God who is announced today. We have gods of science, gods of tribe, gods of political affiliation and so on who tell us to take care of our own and to ignore or even wish harm to those on the outside. These other gods may not quite say to only take care of the strong, but they are exclusionary none the less. They seek power here on earth because they believe that is what real power looks like. But that is not what God calls us to. God calls us to look at the world in the way that he does. Because I think what it ultimately comes down to is having an affinity for the weak makes us more like God.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent which means we are hurtling towards the manger in Bethlehem; the manger where God came to the earth in very humble circumstances and as one of the weakest things possible – a newborn child. In a few days we will proclaim that the God of the universe became so weak that he will not be capable of feeding himself or of moving from one place to another. For all of this and more God will have to rely on his mother Mary, the one who today announces that the world is going to be turned upside down. Is Christianity a religion of the weak? Maybe, if we measure strength in human terms. But God’s strength looks different than our conception of strength. Real strength in God’s terms is humble, it is not selfishness parading as strength. Real strength does not ask what it can do to be further strengthened but rather how that strength can be used to lift up the lowly. As we head towards the manger it is a time to reflect on this strength found in humility and seeming weakness so that we may be God’s own now and forevermore.