

## CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY:

### 2. BLESSED

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Luke 1:39-45

Today is the second Sunday of the season of Advent. Advent comes before Christmas because it is a time when we are invited to prepare for God's coming into this world—both as the child at Christmas and in the time that is to come.

Some feel that Advent is a time of heightened anxiety as we await God's presence. But it shouldn't be. It's not like we're being sent to the principal's office. Ultimately, the message of Advent should be Joy—joy that God loves us so dearly that he is willing to enter into our lives and bless us in person.

But beyond that joy is a foundation of Hope—hope that the world in which we live will be made different, will be made better by God, that this world will be fulfilled by the Kingdom of God.

In this sermon series, we are reading stories about Mary from the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells us how the angel Gabriel first visits the priest Zechariah with the news that his wife Elizabeth will soon conceive and give birth to a son. In his fear and anxiety, Zechariah questions the plausibility of this potential miracle. After all, he and his wife have no children and are both getting along in years. Zechariah asks for a sign. He's probably thinking along the lines of a bolt of lightning or a mild earthquake. Instead, the angel strikes him mute for the duration of his wife's pregnancy. Clearly not the sign he was expecting.

Six months later, the same angel is sent by God to Nazareth to a woman named Mary. She is described as *a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph*. In other words, Mary is a young woman—probably in her teens—who has a fiancé and is planning to settle down to an inconspicuous life in a small village in the province of Galilee. But the visit from the angel changes that. The angel tells Mary, *You have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*"

Favor with God? Son of the Most High? Throne of David? This was all news to Mary, and she asks the angel how that can be since she *has not known a man*.

The angel replies saying, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*

Gabriel then tells Mary about her relative Elizabeth who, by this point, is six months pregnant. Mary responds with one of the greatest confessions of faith when she says, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.* She accepts all that the angel has told her.

In our reading for today, the story continues. Having heard the news from the angel, Mary quickly heads south from Galilee to Judea to the town where Elizabeth lives. When she enters Elizabeth's house and greets her cousin, the child in Elizabeth's stomach jumps and Elizabeth is *filled with the Holy Spirit*. Elizabeth says to Mary, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*

Put yourself in Mary's shoes. What could it mean that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and that she would give birth to the Messiah? We know what it means today but imagine being Mary then. How overwhelming it all must have been! Who could she turn to? Who would understand? Mary decides that Elizabeth is who she needs to see.

The trip to see Elizabeth wouldn't be an easy one. Nazareth to Judea would have been a trip of several difficult days. Ironically, this was a trip that Mary would make again right before her due date when she and Joseph are forced to travel to Bethlehem for the census.

And then, we come to this wonderful scene of the moment when Mary greets Elizabeth. She enters the house of Zechariah, and as she approaches her cousin, the child within Elizabeth leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth is suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth exclaims to Mary, *Blessed are you among women.*

So, what does it mean to be blessed? Does Elizabeth call Mary blessed simply because Mary is now pregnant? Elizabeth had certainly known the pain of not having a child. Does she call Mary blessed because Mary's life will not be like hers? Elizabeth has already told us of the *disgrace* she had endured from her community for being childless. Is Mary blessed simply because she will be free from that stigma and pain?

The question I have for you is this: How exactly was Mary blessed? Was she blessed because she was born with superpower faith? Or is she a normal person who has been chosen by God and touched by God's grace?

And that is what I want to focus on this morning: blessings. I want to talk about the divine gift of being blessed, the ways in which we are blessed, and, consequently, our call to be a blessing to others.

Mary's blessing is by no means the first blessing. Creation itself begins with a blessing. In Genesis 1, the very first thing that God does, after creating the humans, is to bless them. We read: *So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them.*

God didn't create us simply for us to exist. We were created to be a blessing. God didn't create us to test us, or to judge us, or to sit back and watch when we struggle. God created us to bless us. That is God's love for us in action.

But something happened. Somewhere along the way, the brokenness of this world caused us to forget that we are blessed by God. You might even say that this is the root of all the problems in this world—forgetting that we are divinely blessed.

We see this with Adam and Eve. They forget how blessed they truly are, and they sinned. And, ever since, we too have shared in their sin. We too have forgotten how blessed we are.

But God had a plan—a way to bless the world all over again. And that plan has a name, and his name is Jesus. And Jesus was born into this broken world to remind us of God's desire to bless us. And Jesus spent his life in ministry doing just that. He blessed those who had been forgotten: the poor, the hungry, those who were weeping, the hated, the cursed, the broken. He blessed them all. He was born to bless us. And he died to bless us.

Even his last act—as he ascended into heaven—was to offer a blessing to his disciples. We read: *Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven* (Luke 24:50-51). From beginning to end, Jesus' life was a blessing.

For that is what Jesus came to do—to bless the world, to bless us. His mission was blessing. Our mission, as the church, is to continue this work.

But even Jesus needed a blessing. At the start of his ministry, the Holy Spirit sent him to the Jordan River where he is baptized by his relative John. And as he is coming up out of the water, Jesus hears his heavenly Father bless him saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus was truly human, and as one of us, he needed this blessing. It was a blessing like no other. *You are my son, the beloved.*

There is a beautiful book by the late priest, Henri Nouwen, about the blessing from God to Jesus. In this book, **Life of the Beloved**, Nouwen shares his belief that this blessing is the very same blessing given to us through Jesus. We, too, are God's beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

As Nouwen writes, these words, "*You are my beloved* reveals the most intimate truth about all human beings," that God created us to bless us, and to love us; and all human beings created by God are God's beloved. And what a blessed world this would be if all human beings believed this, if we truly believed that we all have been placed in this world to be blessed and loved by God.

Nouwen writes: “It is certainly not easy to hear that voice (calling us God’s beloved) in a world filled with voices that [are shouting]: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless, you are despicable, you are nobody – unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’”

“These negative voices,” he continues, “are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them.”

How important it is, given this, to be reminded that we are God’s beloved, not because of what we do, but because of who we are. We were created to be blessed by God, and to be loved by God. All of us.

You are God’s beloved. And nothing you do will ever change that. Believe this blessing and hold on to it when this world tries to make you forget it.

But it doesn’t end there, of course. It can’t end there. Because there are too many people in this world who still don’t believe this, who struggle to love themselves, much less to believe that they are in fact loved by God. And the only way this will happen – the only way it can happen – is for us to do something about it.

The secret is that we are blessed to be a blessing. We are loved in order to love. We are forgiven in order to forgive. That is our purpose. That is the purpose of all who know and believe that they are God’s beloved. This purpose is to return that love—return that love to God, to ourselves, and to our world. This is Henri Nouwen one more time, on what it means to be a blessing:

“To bless means to say good things. We have to bless one another constantly ... In our society, [which is] so full of curses, we must fill each place we enter with our blessings. We forget so quickly that we are God’s beloved children, and we allow the many curses of our world to darken our hearts. Therefore, we have to be reminded of our belovedness and remind others of theirs.”

Yes, in this broken world of ours, which is so loved by God, people need desperately to be reminded of God’s belovedness. The world needs to be blessed.

Coming back to the question I asked earlier: Was Mary chosen by God because she was special, or was she special because she was chosen by God? To be honest, I don’t know the answer. I wish I did. But it doesn’t really matter because I believe the answer lies somewhere in between.

What makes Mary special is that she recognized God’s blessing in her life. She recognized that she was blessed and she accepted her great role in sharing that blessing with others.

Her cousin said to Mary, *Blessed are you among women*. Elizabeth says this because she understands that Mary is carrying a special child. Mary accepts God's call because she of the blessing that she already feels. She accepts the call to be mother to the Messiah because she knows that he will bring God's blessing to a world. She gave of herself to be part of God's great plan. You can call that her superpower, but it is one that we can all share with her. She gave of herself saying, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*, to share God's blessing with a world that had forgotten it.

In this this season of Advent, may that be our mission as well—to share the blessing of God with the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge Rev. James Laurence for his thoughts on this passage.  
<https://mypastoralponderings.com/2021/12/18/the-gift-of-a-blessing-my-sermon-on-luke-139-45/>