

"You Are a Blessing"

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, December 8, 2024

This sermon was originally designed for last Sunday, but due to excessive snow, we did not have church. There is no sermon for December 1, 2024.

Texts: Luke 1: 26-38 and Isaiah 43: 1-7

Everyone knows that Mary was blessed and that she was an is a blessing. She was chosen by God to bear the Christ child, the Messiah, Jesus. What we fail to recognize is that Mary isn't the only one blessed and who is a blessing. Further, we fail to recognize that Mary had a choice in the matter. While she's told that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and the virgin will conceive, it's not until Mary responds, "Let it be with me as you have said." In other words, Mary said yes, but more about that later. In any case, this familiar story, like many, needs another read for a deeper meaning than perhaps we have had before. And it's especially appropriate for today's world. We are blessed, Mary had a choice, and we have a choice.

Kayla Craig, in her commentary on both passages for today relates, "The Advent journey unfolds like a well-worn quilt, each patchwork piece lovingly threaded across time and space. In each thread, we find blessed assurance that

with every sacred stith, God has been moving toward us all along." This is part of why you see quilts all around the sanctuary. It's a visual reminder of a truth that we often miss. God is weaving us together in a patchwork of beautiful pieces that together make an even more beautiful whole.

Craig continues, "This season reminds us that, what some may see as discarded scraps, the Maker of heaven and earth calls beautiful and blessed. Mary, an ordinary girl from the obscure corners of Nazareth, was not cloaked in power or prestige--but was blanketed in belovedness." One could hardly argue with what Craig has to say.

But what if the quote read like this: "This season reminds us, what some may see as discarded scraps, the Maker of heaven and earth calls beautiful and blessed. Greg (that means insert your own name here), an ordinary person from the obscure corners of Northern Michigan (or from wherever you watch), was not cloaked in power or prestige -- but was blanketed in belovedness." That can't possibly be true. "Not about me," we'd say.

Why? Why do we so often argue with God's decision to call us beautiful and blessed? Why do we think that humans have it right when they tell us how little we are, how much we need to improve ourselves, how much we've fallen,

how bad we are, how sinful we are, how downright terrible, or even hellish we are? And yet, we're so in disbelief when God calls us beloved. The central point of our Bible, but especially of the birth narrative, is that the very people that humanity disregards, or just plain disses, are the very same people God chooses to change the world. Kayla Craig tells us that being blanketed in belovedness is enough. Are we really enough? Or, does God have to fix us first? It depends who you ask. Ask humans, we need a lot of work and we disappoint God constantly. Ask God, and we hear, "You are my beloved." I guess it's simply true that God doesn't really know what God is talking about. Humans know better -- especially Christian ones. We are far better judges of character than is God.

Blasphemy, you say? Think about how we act -- especially toward ourselves.

Craig continues, "Advent invites us to reflect on how we, like Mary, are invited into God's redemptive narrative -- no matter how ordinary or small we might feel -- for each of us has the potential to carry God's love into all the world. In Luke 1: 26-38, the story of Mary and the angel, Gabriel, illustrates how God selects someone the world might overlook to be part of something beautiful.

Gabriel's message, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,' isn't merely a formality but a declaration of Mary's essential place in this divine quilt." And so....are...you!

Mary's response -- "How will this be?" -- is profoundly human.

Further, Gabriel announces, "You are a blessing because the One from whom a blessings flow sees you, knows you, and calls you by name." "When you are facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it's not your productivity or power that will push you through, but the grace of God. (Craig)" A grace freely given by a God who cannot help but to love and to partner with humanity and all creation to create the quilt that God so desires to complete. You are asked to consider this Advent your sacred space within the Divine quilt.

But that's not all that is going on in this story. We've established God's action, but sometimes we leave out human response that is critical to God's agenda moving forward. To Mary was offered the opportunity to be God's partner in the birth of the Messiah. We cannot leave this story without beginning to explore what happened on Mary's end.

I read an incredible article called, *"The Rebellious Nature of Mary, and the Role of Consent in the Advent Season"*, by Laurie Lyter Bright. Bright writes,

In ten years of ministry and nearly 40 years of church attendance (with a loving reminder that Millennials are, in fact, middle aged), I've heard plenty of angles on the Christmas story. The funny. The saccharine. The mysterious. Preached by folks of a variety of races, ages, theological frameworks, and gender expressions. Many of them excellent and thought-provoking. But not nearly enough of them rightly acknowledge that Mary is the most punk rock figure, possibly in all of scripture, certainly in the Nativity. Nor is there sufficient due celebration given to all we learn about Mary and all we learn about God from a singular truth: Mary consents.

That paragraph got me thinking, but Bright got even better as the article continued. My favorite quote is this one, "We have let our popular imagination run wild creating a Mary who is mild and meek, tender, bearing sweetly and stoically her role in keeping the silent night silent. Mary is fragile, yes, but she is, to borrow a phrase, not fragile like a flower. She is fragile like a bomb."

Fragile like a bomb has been, if you'll pardon the pun, blowing up in my mind ever since I first read it. Having an extra week to write this sermon didn't change anything. In fact, it made me think about it more and think about what a disservice we have done to women and girls, and I think even men and boys to a lesser extent, when we make Mary so meek and mild that we think that people of faith must be meek and mild to belong. There is a place for questioning, a place for wondering and being afraid, and there is a place for decision-making when we are called on by God or anyone else to do anything. Maybe we don't always have that power, but I think we sorely underestimate how often we really do.

Further, we ignore that with God we always have a choice...always. It's not like Mary was the only person God could call on to carry the Messiah. That doesn't take away from her role in this story, but it does indicate that God is bigger than we think and gives us far more freedom than any nation, or any person, or any amount of money, or any status, or truly anything in all this world. And Mary was no exception.

"From her first questioning Gabriel's news through the punk anthem that is the Magnificat, Mary's words ring out as deeply, gloriously radical (Bright)." Merry Christmas! I hope you'll never look at Mary the same way again, and maybe even change how you look at yourself with this knowledge that I'd guess is new to many of you.

Bright continues (I'll try not to quote the whole article, but it's truly amazing!), "And yes, a non-violent Savior, born to someone on the margins, is the perfect counterpoint to the abuse of faith for political gain. Here, in that land, then, in that time, as well as here and now, politics is life and death for those on the fringes and under the destructive forces of the empire. This is the world that the expectant Mary knows. This is the world in which she chooses to say yes."

Let me just share a couple more quotes so that this sermon doesn't go on forever and I don't go off the rails:

The Magnificat is a song of wisdom and knowing, of prophecy and promises kept. It should rock us back on our heels every time we hear it.

Mary knew the God to whom she offered her "yes".

If [Mary] had been saying yes out of ignorance, or given no agency in the matter, that would reveal a God who colonizes the body of a woman, a God fixated on exerting power. This God, however, announces a series of promises and in the pause that follows, Mary affirms her desire to participate in this miracle. She says yes.

But here is the best one of all:

God chooses to partner with a voice like Mary's, a mind like Mary's, a whole person like Mary, to speak the truth of God's justice which is indistinguishable from God's love.

So what does all of this mean for us? I told you at the beginning and I'll tell you again: First of all, you are beloved of God. You, in your ordinary self from a part of the world that isn't the center of anything, except maybe a snowbelt. Second, you are given a choice in the matter. Not a coerced choice that comes with judgment and punishment if you make the so-called wrong choice. No, it's a free choice given to you by a God who chooses you today, tomorrow, next week, next year, and forever over and over again despite your answers. God chooses you because of who God is, not who the world thinks you

are. And God pauses to await your response.

Did you ever think Mary could have said, "No"? Does it still bother you? Then take some time with your Bible, your prayer life, your meditation, or whatever you do, to take another look at who this God is. God is unlike anyone you have ever met, and this God chooses this world regardless of what anyone in this world thinks about that choice. And, God has empowered you to make choices too. Yes, God has a plan, but the plan adapts, changes, moves and functions based on the world's partnership with that plan.

Look at history. We have done everything humanity can come up with to make the world something other than what God has designed. We've even voted ourselves further pain by deluding ourselves that there are gods in this world that even come close to the living God. There's only one. And this one operates with a power we cannot imagine, and we will not replicate as long we look for saviors somewhere other than on the margins of the world and it's societies. As long we think it's someone else's job, then the world will never change -- or it might change -- because God is so free that God's will and God's kin-dom will occur. It will not be because of some goofy mis-reading of the book of Revelation or some other wacked theology. No, God's kin-dom will come in

partnership with a creation that finally figures out the God's power is love, and God's sword is mercy, and God's kin-dom is from the bottom-up and from the outside-in.

Advent and Christmas remind us that God is full of surprises. Something amazing is happening right under our noses, and no government, and sadly, few churches, are really tuned in to what it is. It kind of reminds me of a night in which two scared, tired people sought a room in the inn. You don't have to believe the story literally to get the point: God acts, God chooses, God loves, God will find someone to change the world, or several someones.

Christmas isn't a sap story. Christmas is a radical story of a radical God who chooses ordinary people to sing a song in a weary land. Dr. Bright says in her last paragraph, "[Mary joins a great lineage of folks who have heard God's voice so clearly that they learn to trust their own, and declares boldly for the world to celebrate -- THIS is who God is. And in this moment Mary sets a whole new life in motion. She shows us the way to be what each of us is called to be -- a theotokos, a God bearer, living faith out loud with a clarion call that rings across the ages. Mary is the punk rock icon of the season we didn't know we needed. She is here to show us how to live into the risky and radical love of saying yes to

God."

Alleluia! Amen.

For Reference, the article *The Rebellious Nature of Mary, and the Role of Consent in the Advent Season* is by Rev. Dr. Laurie Lyter Bright, who is a pastor, perpetual student, mom, wife, amateur farmer in Neenah, Wisconsin (at the time of writing, 2022). It can be found at <https://justiceunbound.org/the-rebellious-nature-of-mary-and-the-role-of-consent-in-the-advent-season/>