

Questions of Advent: Why am I so blessed...?
Luke 1:39-56, Deuteronomy 4:31-40

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3rd Sun of Advent

³⁹At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

⁴⁶And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

⁵⁶Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Do you ever feel insignificant, as if you and your presence on earth makes little or no difference at all? This week I watched the classic movie, "It's a Wonderful Life" in which George Bailey wonders that very thing. The role of Clarence, the angel, is

to show George how different life would have been if George had never been born. The differences were significant!

So it would be, if you were not here. You make a significant difference!

We pick up the story in Luke's Gospel, of two pregnant women. Elizabeth, the considerably older one is expecting a son, who will be John the Baptist. He will pick up the mantle of the OT prophets and prepare the way among the people to receive the Promised One, Jesus, the Messiah.

Mary, an unwed pregnant teenager, has come to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Mary carries within her womb Jesus, the Savior, conceived in a mysterious and miraculous way which we do not fully understand, but which we and Mary herself, accept by faith.

In ancient middle eastern culture, the value of a woman - her significance - was based solely upon her ability to produce a male heir. Infertility or "barrenness" was considered the worst possible fate for a woman.

That these two women are remembered today - two thousand years later - is significant. They were both likely uneducated, relatively poor, and otherwise were unremarkable people. What set them apart? They are remembered today because they were "blessed" and "favored" by God. And, as we noted last week, they are set apart because of God's ability and their availability. As such, their individual stories are caught up in the much greater story of salvation history!

This encounter between the two women is notable for the unspoken and spoken expressions of joy. That John, even prenatally, leaps for joy within his mother's womb at the sound of Mary's voice, fulfills Gabriel's prophecy:

"Even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (v.15)

Simultaneously Elizabeth herself is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims, "with a loud cry": "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

The expression "a loud cry" refers to a visceral, spontaneous expression. Elizabeth cannot contain her exuberance! This is unrestrained emotion and shameless joy! Elizabeth actually uses two different Greek words – both of which are translated "Blessed".

When she pronounces Mary “*blessed* among women” she uses *eulogemene/os*, which emphasizes that both present and future generations will praise and speak well of both mother and child.

But when she says in v. 45, “*Blessed* is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord”, she uses the word *Makarios*, the same expression Jesus uses to bless people in the Beatitudes (Matthew 6). Elizabeth’s words here could be translated: “*Happy is she who believed... that God is able to keep God’s promises.*”

The blessing she bestows on Mary is reflected on Elizabeth herself, as she poses our third question of Advent:

“And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my LORD comes to even me?” Who am I? Why has such goodness happened to me? (v.43)

Elizabeth’s life has taken a dramatic turn, a role reversal, from being barren (along with all the derision which accompanied childlessness) to bearing the one who would reawaken the dormant hopes of the nation of Israel! Jesus himself would later say of her son, that “among those born of women, no one is greater than John”. (Luke 7:28)

Zechariah’s question: “How can I know this?” was a question of unbelief.

Mary’s question: “How can this be...?” was a question based in her belief that God could in fact, do the impossible, if she said “yes” and agreed to participate in God’s plan.

Elizabeth’s question is one of self-reflection. She recognizes the honor and privilege of being an intimate part of a much bigger story. She is astonished and humbled to find herself free from the burden of shame she had borne for so long. She comes to the realization that she is blessed to carry not just any child, but one whom God will deploy in salvation history to prepare the way for the Messiah! She had no idea her life could mean so much. In awe and wonder she asks, “Who am I that I should be so blessed?”

From our vantage point, we can see that the unique and unexpected events that brought these two women together, are a part of God’s greater plan for the salvation of the world.

You and I may play less prominent roles in God's salvation history, but you and I DO play our own unique and essential roles! However mundane it may seem; God needs each one of us to fulfill our purpose in God's bigger plan. You have a particular circle of people/relationships in your life that God has put there for a reason. This is your circle of spiritual influence!

There are many reasons why it would seem that God would not choose us: there are others with more biblical knowledge, intelligence, or charisma. Yet God chose us for reasons that may not be clear to us but are known to God! Remember, *what matters is not our abilities, but our availability!*

Yes, God chooses even you! Even me!

God has made each of us and gifted us to serve uniquely in ways that are real, ways that matter. We are called by God to serve and share good news. What that looks like will vary from person to person.

Let me tell you about Barbara. Barbara was a believer, but she would be the first to tell you she was not a Bible scholar or evangelist. She was an ordinary woman, mother of two, a schoolteacher. She lived for fifty years in the same house, on the same street, while neighbors came and went. It became her mission in life to greet any newcomers, offering a warm welcome and a plate of homemade cookies.

Guy and Sue Newman were starting a new chapter in their lives: They were expecting their first child, Guy was starting a new job, they had moved to a new community. As it happened, they moved into the house across the street from Barbara. True to form, while they were still surrounded with boxes and bubble wrap, Barbara showed up with a plate of cookies and introduced herself.

Several visits later she asked them if they had a "church home". Guy says: "I knew what a home was, and I had been in a church a time or two, but I had no clue what a "church home" was." They accepted Barbara's invitation to join her for worship. There they heard the good news; they joined a small group Bible study. When their daughter Ashley was born, they asked the pastor about having her baptized. While explaining the meaning of baptism to them, Guy and Sue realized their own need for a Savior. The pastor prayed with them, they accepted Christ as their Savior, and all three of them were baptized together on the same day!

All because of Barbara and a plate of cookies.

You and I are God's beloved. As such, we too are "blessed" and "favored" by God. As this truth becomes woven deeply into our identities, may we find that the energy and joy of the Spirit motivates us. As we overcome our doubts and fears, may we find a delightful freedom in our service, and in being part of God's bigger story of salvation history!

There are rare occasions when words alone are insufficient to express our deepest feelings. "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words, and that which cannot remain silent." (Victor Hugo) Mary bursts into song, a canticle of praise.

"The Magnificat" (v.46b-55) is derived from the Latin, meaning "magnifies". Of all biblical texts, this one has been set to music by more composers than any other. Johann Sebastian Bach, Mozart, Vivaldi, and Rachmaninoff along with many others have been inspired to put these words of Mary's to music.

In this song Mary expresses her wonder at being so favored by God, as to give birth to the Savior. She acknowledges the "great things" that God has done to save and give hope to God's people "from generation to generation" (v.50)! Furthermore, she sings about revolutionary reversals that God will use to accomplish his plan: the proud and powerful will be humbled while the humble are exalted; the hungry will be satisfied, the rich will lose status. In fact, Mary rejoices because God can use even her - -an unwed teenage mother to accomplish a greater purpose! She sees her place in the bigger picture of salvation history.

Friends, we are part of a bigger story than our individual stories. Calvary itself is part of the story of this community. God is at work in ways seen and unseen. Neither is God hindered by any restrictions imposed on us by the coronavirus!

This Advent, we are being challenged to risk the belief that God wants to draw near to us, and enter more intimately into our lives, more than ever before. May the Holy Spirit fill us with a sense of wonder that God can use even you - even me - even Calvary to draw others to Himself!

Remember, Barbara? She was my mother. Guy Newman is now an elder and clerk of session and his wife Sue is a deacon in their church. Their now adult children and grandchildren are all believers because of Barbara and a plate of cookies!

When my sister and I were preparing her home for sale after she died, there was a knock at the door. There stood a young Hispanic woman, who now lives in the house where Sue and Guy Newman had lived. She expressed her condolences and said to us: "When I moved in across the street, your mother was the only neighbor who came over to welcome me." And yes, true to form, she brought cookies and coloring books for the children!

Friends, why are we so blessed and favored by God?

Because God has a role for you and for me to play in the bigger story of salvation history!

Why are we so blessed and favored by God?

In order to share the Good News of Jesus' coming. With whom is God calling you to share this week?

Pray

Lord, as with Mary and Elizabeth, Barbara, Guy and Sue - each one of us has a role to play in Your larger story of Salvation History. We are so blessed to possess a saving knowledge of you. May we give the greatest gift this Christmas and share the good news of your love with those in our circle of influence. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.