

“I Am Blessed”

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Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry,

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

43 And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

I AM BLESSED

I was at a theme park recently
and saw a young girl with her family.

She was about 15 or 16 years old,
and she wore a sweatshirt that proclaimed,
“I am blessed.”

I wondered why she chose that sweatshirt.
Why did she feel blessed?
Was it an expression of her faith?

Did she feel blessed because she and her family were having a good time at Disney World?

Or maybe she just wore that sweatshirt because that was the only one clean that day?!

I don't know.
But, her sweatshirt got me thinking.

What does it mean to be blessed?
Could we wear a sweatshirt that proclaimed
"I am blessed"?
Do we feel that positive about our lives?

And if not, what would it take for us to change?
What would it take for us to feel blessed?

MARY IS BLESSED

In our lesson for today,
we learn that Mary is blessed.
We know this because the angel of the Lord, Gabriel said as much.

She is the favored one.
She is blessed because she is going to have a baby.

But, this is not going to be just any baby.
This child will be the son of the Most High.

More than that, his name is already picked out.
His name will be Jesus which means
"to deliver or to save".

Jesus will assume the throne of his ancestor David.
He will deliver God's people from oppression.
And his kingdom will have no end.

Something eternal is going on
with Mary and her unborn child.
HOW CAN THIS BE?

But, understandably, the angel's word
is not enough for Mary.
She has her doubts about this strange blessing.

Mary wants to know,
"How can this be?"

I am still a virgin.
I can't have a baby.

How can this be?
That's the question we still ask.

How can the eternal become part of this temporary, flesh and blood world?

How can a kingdom last forever?
Nothing lasts forever. Right?

And what chance does a poor, unwed mother have in this unforgiving
world?

The angel explains it this way.
There's more to come in Mary's life.
The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary.
She will be overshadowed by the Most High.

And she will have child,
the Messiah, the Son of God.

NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

And then Gabriel offers some concrete evidence to bolster Mary's faith.

He said,

"Everyone thought that your relative Elizabeth was too old to have a child.
Well guess what?
This is the sixth month of her pregnancy."
And, the angel continues,
this is just the beginning for:

“Nothing *will be* impossible with God.”

Mary is being asked to trust
in the promise of God’s future.
Nothing *will be* impossible with God.

Notice that the verb is in the future tense.

Things might not look so good right now.
But, this is not the end of the story.
With God there’s always more to come.

And Mary believes the message of the angel.

“Here I am the servant of the Lord.
Let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary can say “I am blessed” because she believes that the future is in
God’s hands.

TRUST AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In the field of developmental psychology, we learn that one of the first
things a child needs in order to develop properly is to grow up in a world
that is trustworthy.

A child needs to have the adults in their life
who are there for them.

When a child cries she needs to know
that someone will come and feed her.

When a child feels uncertain he needs to know
that someone will come and hold him.

If the infant believes that he or she is in good hands, then they’re able to
move on to the next developmental task in life.
If that doesn’t happen,
the child’s emotional growth is stunted.

I think a similar process takes place
in our spiritual development.

The first thing a child of God needs to learn is that God is trustworthy. All
other spiritual growth will be stunted if we don't learn and believe this first
message.

Like Mary we need to hear
and believe the message of the angel.
"Nothing *will be* impossible with God."

The promise begins now,
but it continues into our future,
"nothing *will be* impossible with God".

We know the rest of Mary's story.
Mary will ponder the promises
of the angel in her heart,
and she will have her heart broken.

And yet, there will always be more to come.
Mary will learn through the twists and turns of her life what the apostle Paul
will later write.

All things do work together for good
for those who love the Lord
and are called according to his purpose.

CALLED BY GOD

We too are all called by God.
We too are called to be Christ bearers.
We too are called to make the Word become flesh in our humble lives.

Believing that takes faith.
When confronted with this awesome message,
our first response will be like Mary's.
"Lord, I think you've got the wrong person.
I'm not suited to bear your Word.

I'm too weak.
I'm too old.
I'm too young.
I'm too busy.

How can this be?
It's impossible."

And all that is absolutely true.
We are weak.
We aren't suited to bear the divine.

It is impossible.

But, the call of God is not about what we can do.
The call of God is about
what God can do through us.

The call of God is about the Holy Spirit overshadowing us.

The call of God is about a new birth in our lives.

It's like how Eugene Peterson translated John 1:14.
"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

We celebrate Christmas each year because the message is good news,
but also news that is hard to believe. Who would think that God would
move in our neighborhood?

But, God did move into our neighborhood.
And God is still with us even today.

The doctrine of the virgin birth
is about the incarnation,
about God coming into our neighborhood.

The impossible, God with us,
first became a possibility in Mary.

A PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

But, that impossible possibility
is also a promise for our future as well.
We are called to look at the future
with a wide eyed sense of wonder and hope.

What new thing might God do in our life?
What new birth might God bring into our life?

How might we be born again
by the power of God's Spirit?

Despite our protests, the angel still proclaims to us:
"Nothing *will be* impossible with God."

If we are to say, "I am blessed",
we must not only trust God for today;
we must also trust God for tomorrow.

DOWN TO EARTH ENCOURAGEMENT

But, remember that the angel didn't just ask Mary to believe the impossible.
He also gave her some down to earth encouragement.

Her relative, Elizabeth was also a part of this story.

Remember that this old woman had miraculously conceived a son.
And that son would also be special.

His name would be John,
and he would be like the prophets of old.
He would be God's voice crying in the wilderness.
He would prepare the way of the Lord.

When Mary heard about old Elizabeth having a baby, she needed to see
this miracle for herself.

ELIZABETH'S SONG

So, just as soon as the angel left,
Mary didn't waste a minute.
She went straight to Zachariah's house
in the hill country of Judah.

And when she came to the door of the house,
a six month pregnant Elizabeth was waiting.

Mary greeted Elizabeth...and then it happened.
(All the women here today
who have had a child will identify with this one.)

The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped.

Even before he was born,
John was pointing to the Messiah.
And Elizabeth got the message loud and clear!

So Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,
began to sing.
If we would give her song a title,
one word would do it: "Blessed"

The words to Elizabeth's song go:

"Mary you're so blessed,
more than any other woman,
and the child you are carrying is blessed.

And even though I don't deserve it,
I am also blessed.
The mother of my Lord has come to visit.

When I heard your greeting,
the baby in my womb danced like a lamb.

You are blessed Mary.
You believed what God said.

You believed every word.”

The first part of Luke’s gospel is a musical.
Everybody sings.

First, Elizabeth sings.

Next Mary will sing.

Pretty soon the whole heavenly host will chime in:
“Peace on earth, good will toward men and women.”

No wonder we do so much singing at Christmas.
It fits with the message.

After all, what else can we do
when we are blessed from above?
What else can we do
when the impossible becomes possible?

We can’t explain it.
We can only sing about it.

The best way for us to describe the blessing of God that comes from above
is to sing.

A SEASON OF EXPECTATION

There’s an old saying that a mother is a mother before a father is father.

A mother feels in her body the reality of new life in a way the father can’t.

She has a sense of expectation.

She prepares for the future child with baby clothes and diapers and a special room.

Waiting for a child turns a mother’s life upside down.

And in a greater way, waiting for the birth of a Messiah turns our life upside down.

This is the season of anticipation.

This is the season when we dream
in song and story about a new world.

This is the season when we dream in song and story about peace on earth
and good will toward all people.

Sounds impossible doesn't it?
But, nothing *will be* impossible
in the kingdom that comes.

We believe the future is filled with possibility because it is God's future.

And God's dream for tomorrow
brings blessing into our life today.
God's truth has been born in our hearts,
and that makes a difference now.

We carry in our hearts the seeds of the harvest
that will surely come.

We are blessed.

SONGS OF RESISTANCE

But, as Stan Lee might have put it, with great blessing comes great responsibility.

The songs of Advent and Christmas are really protest songs.

And we are called to participate in the revolution.

Our songs are an act of resistance.
We sing not just to feel good.
We sing to assert God's claim on the world.

Let me give you an example of the power of song.

In 1989, several months before the fall of the Berlin wall, protesters in Leipzig, Germany gathered by candlelight around St. Nikolai church.

(This was the same church where Bach composed many of his cantatas.)

And they would sing.

Over a period of two months the number of singing protesters grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand.

This was over half the citizens of the city.

They would continue to sing their songs of hope and protest until their songs shook the powers of their nation and changed the world.

Later on when someone asked the officers of the East German secret police why they didn't crush this protest like they had so many others he replied:

“We had no contingency plan for song!”

The powers that be are helpless in the face of a people who sing God's song.

Elizabeth had one foot in the nursing home
and one foot in the delivery room.
And Mary was so young, she was not yet married.

And yet both of these women were called
to bear children of promise.
Children through whom God was going to change the world.

From one standpoint, the idea seemed ridiculous.
They had no power or influence,
tucked away in the hill country of Judea.

No wonder Mary was reluctant to believe the angel's message at first.

If we had been in her place,
we would have asked the very same thing.

“How can this be?”

But, God gave Mary and Elizabeth a song.

They sang about the Lord's blessing.

They sang about the Lord's promise to change things in their dark world.

They sang about the Lord's promise to lift up those who had put down all their life.

Mary's song in particular, the song we call the Magnificat is about the great reversal. The poor would be lifted up, and the rich and powerful would be sent home with nothing.

Mary's song is a musical version of what her son, Jesus would later say.

Where's the profit in gaining the whole world and yet losing your soul?
(Matthew 16:26)

In the end all our material possessions are worthless, but our relationship with God proves to be the real treasure. (Luke 12:13-21)

Mary's encounter with the Word of God gave her a wisdom and vision that belied her youth. This young girl saw the power of eternity at work in her life, and that gave her a song of hope that is still sung today.

Mary's song begins as a solo, but over time many voices have been added to the chorus.

A SONG OF HOPE

One of the most powerful things we can do is
to sing God's song, to sing about the kingdom that comes.

That song brings us hope
and comfort in our darkest hour.

A pastor remembered singing "O Come O Come Emmanuel" the Sunday after the killings at the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

One of the verses in particular seemed appropriate,

“O Come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
 Our spirits by Thine advent here
 Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
 And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
 Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
 Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

The pastor wrote,

“As the tears flowed
 and voices were lifted in this song that Sunday,
 I realized that singing of light in a world of darkness is, indeed, nothing
 short of an act of resistance.”

A song writer starts one of her Advent hymns:

“We light the Advent candles against the winter light...”

The key phrase in that song is “against the winter light”.

We don’t light the Advent candles
 ...because of the winter light
 ...or during the winter light.

We light the Advent candles
 ...“against” the winter light.

In other words, we refuse to succumb to the darkness in our world.

Instead we light the candle and sing.

We sing of a hope that is impossible with us...
 But *will be* possible with God.

Yes, it’s true.
 I guess I should buy the sweatshirt.
 Maybe you should get one too.

And with Mary we can proclaim and sing, I am blessed.”
 AMEN.