

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Advent 4

December 21, 2014

Scripture Reading:
Luke 1:26-38

More Great Expectations

Have you ever noticed in the baptism liturgy that one of the first announcements made is “this child is blessed.” In fact the very act of Baptism is a visual public acknowledgement of a blessing. Baptism acknowledges a desire to have a child live in the way of Holy Love - blessed from the very beginning of life. Welcomed by God.

Now I wonder if you noticed any connection between this and today’s scripture. I discovered that the one thing that Mary receives before she accepts the call upon her life is a blessing. Gabriel said to her “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.” (Luke 1:28-30)

She was blessed and reminded that she was chosen by the most Holy God. Personally I think this is a central part of the Christian journey, and the journey of life for that matter.

“Mary is regularly hailed as a model of faith for her acceptance of the role God invites her to play as the mother of Jesus. And for good reason. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, the willingness to trust the promises of God is the mark of discipleship. And so Elizabeth believes that in her old age she will nevertheless bear John, and the disciples believe they will fish for people, and the repentant thief believes Jesus is innocent and asks his blessing and so on. Similarly, Mary also believes God’s promises.

But what is it, exactly, that Mary believes? Yes, she believes Gabriel’s announcement that she will bear Jesus. But before that, she believes that God noticed her, that God favours her, that God has blessed her and has great plans for her.”¹

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/12/advent-4-b-blessed-like-mary/>

Perhaps this in itself is a really good reason to hold baptisms and blessings of children at infancy. It sets the stage for a life that has been blessed by God. As we witness a baptism and as we hear the story of one like Mary we are to be reminded that we too are blessed. David Lose suggests “the first, and in some ways the most important, thing we are called to believe is that God similarly notices, favours, and blesses us. And once we believe that, we can do incredible things.

Blessing, you see, is a powerful thing. And, sadly, a rare thing. We live in a world that seems geared toward rewards and punishments. Whether at work or school or even home, we have been conditioned to expect people to give us only what we deserve. *(And let’s be honest many of us think of ourselves as much less than we deserve)* But blessing operates on a different logic. Blessing is never deserved, but always a gift. Blessings intrudes into, interrupts, and ultimately disrupts our quid pro quo world to announce that someone sees us as worthy and special apart from anything we’ve done.”²

Perhaps it has always been that way and that is why Mary is so perplexed and asks “How can this be?” I’m sure Mary questions why God would favour her, a lowly young poor woman. “But that’s of course just what blessing is – unmerited and undeserved regard and favour. And as the blessing sinks in, Mary is able to open herself to the work of the Holy Spirit to use her to bless the whole world through her willingness to carry Jesus.” Noticing this blessing is important because I think one the things we have the hardest time believing is that God favours us too. You may feel unworthy of God’s blessing but I wonder if you are any less worthy than Mary. Or Joseph, or David, or the Samaritan Woman, or the lepers, or....the list goes on.

“In this story we hear about God noticing and blessing someone who by all accounts is a nobody in the ancient world. And when this nobody young girl believes God’s blessing and accepts God’s favour, the world begins to turn.” Mary is an example of what can happen when you believe that God notices, favours, and blesses you: you may just change the world! Imagine, if we accept God’s favour and blessing - the world will be transformed. I truly believe that, and yet I wonder how we can convince ourselves and one another deep inside, in the core of our being that we are worthy of the blessing and love of our most holy creator? I long for each one of you to know that beyond doubt.

And knowing this I would like you to hear an Advent reading I shared with you last week again, this time focused just on Mary, blessed by God.

² IBID

Changed by the Ancient Story (Micol Contrell)

“Advent centres us on Christ’s coming, the coming of Christ past, present and future. It’s the time to centre ourselves on the advent of God, the coming of God into this world.

What does it sound like to you if you are told that YOU, you are the site of incarnation, you are the place where the transforming love of Christ will come today and tomorrow.

What does it sound like to you if you are told the YOU, you are Mary impregnated by the Holy, a key place in the dominion of God in the full reign of holiness being nurtured and nourished into this world?

What does it sound like to hear that YOU, you are the place where Christ’s deep and wide love will be birthed, from whom God’s hope, peace, joy and love will emerge, and where people will be invited to encounter the Holy?

What does it sound like? Is there fear, hesitation, uncertainty?

Do you want to write it off and say “Not me, I’m too young old, weak, fearful; distracted, stubborn, uncertain?”

Do you want to write it off and say “Not me, I don’t know enough, love enough, have enough, I am not holy enough?”

If you hear your name being called out and the words “Blessed are you, you will bear the Messiah,” are there any preconceived notions about God and how God works that you need to let go of? Do you need to let go of any ideas you have about yourself?

What limitations from encountering others as Mary’s, sites of incarnation, do you need to pass beyond so you can see God being birthed into this world in your neighbourhood?

What does it sound like to us if we are told we are Marys?

From the stillness and the questions we pray: God, who breaks through the limits of mind and body, time and space, friars and uncertainties, in the pilgrimage of Advent and beyond help us to empty ourselves of all that holds us back from being a Mary in our time

from being a place where Christ is birthed again and again in our touch, in our words, in our thoughts, in our life, in community and communion.

Help us to let go and fall into you and in that embrace give birth to your limitless possibilities and transforming love.

In this Advent time help us to not only hear and speak the ancient story of Christ’s birth but to enter into it and be forever changed. This we pray with the “yes” of Mary

Amen May it be so.”³

So on this last Sunday of Advent if you hear anything, please hear you are God’s favour ones called and commissioned to hear, believe, and respond to God’s blessing wherever we are?

This season we have focused on Great Expectations. We have talked about the expectations we have for one another, for our children, for ourselves. We have talked about the expectations we have for Emmanuel, God with us, and the expectations God has for us. We have heard the expectations of the prophets, and we have been reminded that with all the expectations we hold for ourselves and others the most important dream and expectation is to live as God created us to be.

Take a moment to imagine where you will go this week, what you will do, whom you will meet. Now imagine how in each of these circumstances God is noticing and blessing you so that you might be a blessing to the world.

In this season we have Great Expectations. How will we participate in bringing Immanuel to every experience of this season. Look for Jesus in the needs of every person you encounter at every Christmas party, dinner and gift exchange. Bring the presence of hope, joy, peace and love every place you go and perhaps this season will open our eyes to the presence of God in our lives.

You may have wonders and doubts just like Mary and many prophets before. You may feel unworthy of being blessed or blessing others. After all much of the world spends a lifetime telling us the opposite. So many of the voices in our lives conspire to make us feel like nobody and nothing. But in time, if we can say it again and again, it may just sink in that God has noticed, favoured, and blessed us so that we might in turn bless and change the world.

With a Rush of Grace

Carol Makalah and Grace Scott (The United Church Observer, December 2014)

Are we the pregnant pause
between Advent and Epiphany?
Once there was a young Galilean girl
who was filled with joy (and terror)
at the awesome mystery
growing within her body.

³ Contrell, Micol, Allenford-Park Head P.C. Allenford Ont. Gathering.

Who should she tell
about this miracle?
Who would judge her,
reject her,
stand by her?
“Why me, Lord?
Why me?”
Once more we walk with Mary,
talk with her,
learn from her —
not quite certain
who will be present
when we speak about the Mystery
that is growing within us —
The mystery that grows
and guides us
to birth new beginnings
in the midst of our confusion
(when we feel least prepared,
leaning on the strong arm
of the One who will not abandon us.)
We cry out. We catch our breath.
... We gather courage ...
And with a rush of grace
we realize the wait is over.
Our instincts take over
as we learn to sing lullabies
to this new Blessing of Peace and Joy.

Please join me in this conclusion.

“Greetings, favoured ones. The Lord is with you and plans to do great things through you.”

“How can this be?”

“Whether at work or school, whether at home or in the world, the Holy Spirit is with you and will guide you in all you do and say so that you may be a blessing to the world.”

“Let it be according to God’s call on my life.”

Amen.