

Preparing the Way for Blessedness
Mark 1:1-8, Luke 1:46-55
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo
December 10, 2017

Mark 1:1-8:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ';*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Luke 1:46-55:

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

What does it mean to be blessed? I feel as if we live in a world where we have a tendency to say things without really thinking about what they mean, and this word is no exception. On Instagram you can find pictures of manicures and pedicures, or family, or even one's dinner with the hashtag "blessed." People refer to their great wealth or influence, or their white privilege and power as "being blessed." And there's no problem in being grateful for what you have, I just always find myself thinking of the implications of the converse thought...as in, what if I don't have a nice car, or home, or meal? What if I don't have any family, or a lot of money, or a great support system? Am I not blessed? Has God forgotten me? I don't believe this is true, but I do think this prompts us to take a serious look at our concept of blessedness and what it means to actually be blessed.

This is a bit of an unusual preaching text. I combined the text for this Sunday, which involves John the Baptist being the voice in the wilderness, as well as the story of Mary's song, or the Magnificat, as there will be no sermon next Sunday on which to reflect on the Magnificat. I know both of these texts to be revolutionary and celebratory in nature. They are essence of what, I believe, it means to live into Advent, here and now, in our context.

First, there's the Magnificat itself. To speak in broad strokes, people love this text, particularly people who flirt with, for lack of a better word, high church/liturgical church sensibilities. I was first introduced to this text, and the Latin word for it, in high school. My high school choir was singing Vivaldi's Gloria for our Christmas concert, and I was in love with it. So my high school choir director lent me a Christmas choral CD. When I played it I was doing some other things, and after a while, "part 2" of the CD played on. It was Bach's Magnificat. The brass and strings open the piece in a rather joyful way, almost comical. The movements range from reflective, to sad, to happy, to pensive, and I remember loving every minute of it. It prompted me to look at the text. I was familiar with it, but had never taken the time to really "look" at it as I felt others had, and it quickly became something of a feminist manifesto for me, not in any sort of "traditional" or "secular" feminist sense but in the sense that here was a young woman, taking on the future of our world by saying yes to becoming the mother of the center of our faith.

This week I took a rather uncomfortable look at an article written by the Rev. Wil Gafney entitled, did Mary say "me too?" It takes a look at the Annunciation which Dan spoke about last week. Gafney looks at the story from the vantage point of a young teenager, who has a powerful male figure in the angel Gabriel come to tell her what's going to happen to her body, in a very intimate space. This is a message from another powerful male figure in that of God, the divine. The "me too"

movement has spread across social media as collection of women's stories acknowledging their experiences of sexual assault and harassment following very public claims against a number of celebrities and other influential men.

I immediately rushed to judgment with all sorts of defenses, but the author was expecting that and told her readers to sit with the uncomfortable thought. This, I felt, was a good exercise. It WAS uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. A scared, soon-to-be teen mom was "chosen" as it were to become pregnant in a totally unorthodox way and bear the great joy and burden of being mother to the Son of God. Maybe she felt she had no choice? Did she feel put upon? Was she coerced? Forced?

It was an interesting and unsettling thought, but then I was blown away, in looking again at the situation, at the agency that Mary has in this passage. She said, wait, hold on, I'm going to be what now? How can this be? What's going to happen? She thinks about it. We don't know how long it took her to answer. Maybe she said "yes" in the moment, maybe it was a few days later. But Mary is the one in control here. She's not meek, or mild, or passive. She asks Gabriel, a messenger of the Lord, a question as to how in the world this was going to happen.

I'm not upset with Gafney for going there. She asks an important question. Do women of the ancient world have any sort of say in what happens to them? Historically, likely not. But this is different. Here, we have what may sound to be a rather passive, "Let it be according to your Word," but then we have the Magnificat, the song of Mary. Mary has a monologue, right in the middle of this chapter, all to herself, which is a rarity in the Bible for a woman. Mary is ecstatic for what this holy birth means. Mary is voicing her consent, her very holy consent, as a woman, a poor woman, a single woman, who has been visited by a messenger of the Lord being asked to take on the most sacred of tasks. She is a prophetess. She is a saint. She is a preacher. She is a messenger. She is soon going to be a mother. And all generations will call her blessed. And she is saying "yes" to all of it.

In this song, Mary is talking about the transcendent power of God. A God that has done great things, whose mercy knows no bounds, who has done mighty deeds, brought down the proud, brought down rulers and lifted up the common person, filled the hungry while sending away the rich, whose promises extend generation to generation.

I'm not forgetting Gafney's article, about Mary being a holy sister to those who say "me too." I believe she is indeed. Mary is the very example of a blessed woman, in an age where it is so hard for women to claim their blessedness. Women are sacred

beings. We have the ability hold and nurture life, like Mary, to lead, like Deborah, to work hard, like Martha, to bear witness, like Mary Magdalene, to inspire, like Esther, to handle more than most can bear, like Ruth and Naomi, to feel deeply, like Leah, and do whatever it is that we want to do, like Queen Vashti. Some of us do this in very open, demonstrative ways; others of us are more quiet and subtle. But Mary is calling on us to claim our blessedness, to speak up, to say “me too” when we are violated and demand justice from a God that scatters the proud hearted and haughty, who think they can get away with what they do by their power and might.

Because it is these perpetrators, these violators of the rights of women and children that Mary is speaking of. The rich, the haughty, those that do as they please without consequence, the media moguls, the celebrities, the men of influence in our own communities and churches that actively violate sacred boundaries and cross intimate lines, these are the ones that will be scattered by God’s strong arm. These are the ones that need to live in fear of God’s justice and righteousness, and who need to move out of the way when the voice in the desert cries to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

And in claiming our blessedness as women, and honoring women as blessed beings, we are in turned blessed. We are living in an age where people are made to feel lowly. And this isn’t just a gender thing, any of us are made to feel lowly for many reasons. Maybe we aren’t fully able bodied. Or we don’t have the level of education that we feel our friends have, or we’re older in an age where youth is worshipped. Maybe we have a longstanding illness that takes it out of us, or we don’t have documentation, or our skin color makes us a “political issue.” These aspects of our lives do not make us “lowly.” While many are victims of an unjust world, looking at ourselves in that light does nothing for us. However, we are made to feel “lowly” or “less than” by forces beyond our control, and Mary is saying that this is not God’s dream for God’s people, nor is it going by unnoticed. God has done great things, yes, but God is also actively doing this in our world, today.

I also want to make sure we don’t ignore our actual text for this week, as it is indeed connected to this story. Mark’s gospel tells us the story of John the Baptist, the baby that came to Elizabeth in her old age, destined to be a voice in the wilderness. John’s role was to prepare the way for Jesus to enter into the world, starting off by baptizing and forgiving sins. John was also a proclaimer, a preacher, whose message was not only that of forgiveness, but of prophetic imagination in the image of Jesus coming to baptize the world with the Holy Spirit.

John is not unlike Mary in his proclamation, calling on us to look toward God for both power and might, coming to us not in the form of a ruler, king, dictator, or

emperor, but in the form of a baby born in a feeding trough in an innkeeper's barn. This child would grow to preach forgiveness of sins, proclaim the upside down kingdom, hang out with sex workers, tax collectors, fishermen, and women and men of questionable backgrounds. This Messiah would bring to life Mary's song, being the "great thing" the "Mighty one" has done for humanity, keeping in mind the humble, extending mercy, performing miracles and "great deeds," casting out the rich and bringing in the poor, doing the work of justice on earth, just as it is in heaven. And in this, Jesus blesses us, marking us as blessed.

So what does it mean to be blessed? Truly blessed? I believe it means living into who you are and who God created you to be. Being blessed means recognizing your own blessedness and speaking up when you are mistreated, or violated, or hurt and naming injustice. It also means being that voice for others when they are silenced or can't speak up for themselves. Being blessed means proclaiming God, through word and deed, just by being you. Being blessed is not about worldly notoriety or by having money or status, in fact, it about the opposite. It's not about achieving that high-paying or highly respected job, or getting that degree, it's not about that second home or even about the bevy of family and friends you have surrounding you. It's about carrying within you the hope of the world. Being a holy vessel for the Savior of the Nations who came to us in the most humble and vulnerable of states.

What does it mean to prepare for blessedness? I am often struck by images of housecleaning and sprucing things up when it comes to Advent, this holy "tidying up" and "preparing the way" for something truly great to happen. But what does it mean to do that in ourselves? I think we need to look at what needs "cleaning" and "clearing" in our own lives, looking for that which can prepare the way for our own blessedness. Is there some truth that you need to speak to someone? Are there things you need to do for those who may not have the money or resources you do? Do you need to give some possessions away? Do you need to be spending your time in a different way? Also take stock of what you're already doing, the preparing of the way of the Lord right here in our community, here and now. How do you promote peace, and discipleship, and love? Acknowledging both where we shine and where our shortcomings are can help us prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

Mary and John the Baptist, but especially Mary, remind us that during the Advent season, we should prepare for and celebrate our own blessedness. That we serve a God who brings down the mighty, lifts the lowly, and blesses generation after generation with God's never-ending mercy. May we go into this season with the grit

of John the Baptist, the bold voice of Mary, and the humility of the baby that is about to be born in order to save us all. Amen.