

Sermon Series: Anxious

Sermon Title: Mary

Luke 1:26-56

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Adam Hamilton suggests that in making her way to her cousin Elizabeth's home, Mary is "...seeking out an older woman, a maternal figure to lean on and confide in. And the fact that Mary was willing to travel nine days across three mountain ranges to see Elizabeth speaks volumes about how Mary was feeling. She was anxious, longing for someone who might believe her and who could help her make sense of what was happening."¹ Elizabeth was of course married to Zechariah and at the time of Mary's visit with Elizabeth, Elizabeth is about to give birth to their son who we will come to know as John the Baptist.

And so, after nine long days of difficult travel Mary arrives at the village of Ein Karem. Luke tells us, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in Elizabeth's womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed, 'Blessed are you Mary, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' (1.41-42) 'And why has this happened to me,' Elizabeth continued, 'that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your voice, the child in my womb leaped for joy.'" (1.43-44) "Now Elizabeth and Zechariah had spent their lives waiting, praying, watching, and trusting in the promise that God would act to save their people. And so, from that posture of prayerful waiting Elizabeth recognized that the child Mary was carrying was none other than, as she said, 'my Lord'. And so, Elizabeth is the first person in the gospels to acknowledge who Jesus is."²

It was an amazing, exciting, frightening journey for Mary. Less than two weeks before she is told by an angel that she will bear a son, God's son, and that he will be the Messiah of his people and the savior of the world. She made the long, arduous journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth and all the way she had struggled to make sense of this word, this news. But Elizabeth seems to already know and she is filled with joy. Elizabeth greets Mary, encouraging her not to be afraid and telling her that she has been blessed, blessed and chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah. So much good will come of this, you are blessed Mary, and the child within you is blessed as well.³

Now I want us to think about this for a moment. Mary is *blessed* by God. "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth is certain of this, Mary is blessed. But what sort of blessing is this? "Sometimes we think God's blessing involves gaining money, power, popularity, or notoriety and prestige. Blessedness is often associated with a life of comfort and ease. When we describe our blessings, they often

¹ Adam Hamilton, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*. p.63.

² Ibid. p.66.

³ Ibid. p.67.

include our homes, our jobs, our health, our position in the community, our wealth, and our stuff. But Mary's blessedness wasn't material. It wasn't born of security or physical well-being. In fact, Mary lacked many of things we often associate with being blessed. Mary's blessedness came from being a part of God's plan.

Luke seems to be suggesting that blessedness comes from being used by God for God's kingdom. Mary's blessedness was the fact that she was chosen by God to bear the Messiah. And there is a paradox here because this blessedness was not to be confused with ease or comfort or a well-being that came from possessions. To the contrary, we saw last week how Mary and Joseph would face the whispers of those who knew she conceived outside the marriage covenant. Mary's blessedness meant that she would face the terrible difficulties that came with being the mother of Jesus – fleeing to Egypt when Herod sought to kill the child, watching as others sought to destroy him when he began his ministry, and finally standing by as he was beaten and crucified. This is what blessedness looked like for Mary. 'The piercing truth,' says William Barclay, 'is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy, but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it.'"⁴

When I think about Mary and how her life defines a different kind of blessedness I think of Abraham and Sarah who were blessed but called by God to leave all that was familiar and certain and travel to the land that God would show them. I think of St. Paul who was blessed, but who had to die to one life in order to follow the risen Christ. Paul gave up everything to follow Jesus. I think of Mother Teresa who devoted her life to serving the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. I think of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador. From his Cathedral pulpit Romero became the voice of the voiceless poor. He denounced the killings, the torture and the disappearances of community leaders in San Salvador who were working on behalf of the poor. He demanded justice and set up legal aid projects and ministries to support the victims of the violence. He was vilified in the press, attacked and denounced to Rome by Catholics of the wealthy classes, harassed by the security forces and in March 1980 was assassinated while presiding at Mass. And I think of Jesus who says if you will deny yourself, give your life away, take up the cross and follow me you will have life and life abundant. What a strange way of being blessed.

In contrast, we are often told during this holy season that what it means to be blessed can be measured by how much is under the tree. There are a number of commercials currently airing that basically say that this will be a great Christmas if product A or B is under the tree on Christmas morning. Every time I see them I want to shake the television and say, "No, Christmas is great not because of stuff, but because of Jesus, Mary's son.

⁴ Ibid. 66-67.

Elizabeth knew it and the child in Elizabeth's womb knew it too. They knew that it is the presence of Mary's Son Jesus who makes the difference, who makes Christmas great, who is the reason we are blessed.

Retailers are in the business of making money so I don't fault them for getting this wrong. But we should know better, we who know Jesus, who supposedly have given our hearts and our lives to Him, we should teach and preach the truth of what it means to be blessed the way Mary was blessed. We the Church, the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the world know that God's blessing cannot be equated with perfect health, and increasing wealth, and power, with having an easy, care-free life. And faith and Christian practices are not strategies for achieving the so-called "good life." It is wrong any time the Church intentionally or unintentionally proclaims a message that says, "Come to Jesus, your bank account will grow, your children will be perfect, your marriage will be a success, life will be like one continuous vacation."

We know better than that. We know, like the saints before us have known, that the kind of faith and blessedness that Mary knew and that Elizabeth recognized in Mary is the blessedness that comes from being filled with the presence of Christ, the blessedness that comes from giving your life and your heart to God, and being used by God in God's gracious work of reclaiming and renewing the world, even if that work sometimes breaks your heart. Because it just might. Being intimately connected with Mary's son is sometimes not an easy road to walk, but it is a blessed road. The good news is that following in the way of Mary's son leads to authentic and abundant life. And, it is a road that Jesus has walked before us and will walk with us.

The beautiful truth of Christmas, the good news for this weary world filled with people who know that Wal-Mart and Target and Amazon cannot satisfy the longing of their hearts, and for people who wonder if Mary's blessing might also be for them, is that "Something happened while we were all out at the malls, while we were baking cookies and worrying about whether we bought everyone the right gift, something happened to Mary and to us – Christ was born. God is here. And for that reason, not for all of the superficial reasons we often think, but for that reason, because of Jesus we are blessed. We are blessed because Christ is with us.

Now we can go through the routine this Christmas. We can decorate our homes, we can decorate the Church, we can have all the outward appearance that Christmas is coming. We can even celebrate all the right religious observances and Services, we can have a great Christmas. Or, we can be like Mary and open our hearts and our lives and risk being blessed and in so doing become a blessing for others.

We are called to be the Church, to be for the world the body of Christ, the ongoing incarnation of Jesus, to be like Mary and be bearers of God's Son. The gift and the call we have been given is the call to be faithful to him – to live our lives in such a way that this world, and this community are

closer to God because of us. The gift and the call we have been given is to open our hearts and our lives anew that we might be so filled with the presence of Christ that this little corner of God's world might experience the blessedness of Christmas.

While the world is scrambling around trying to buy happiness, Mary, the favored one of God, sings. She sings not a song of sentimental Christmas happiness, but a song of joy. She expects that things will be different, and things will change through the birth of her son. Mary tells us what blessedness looks like when she sings God's praise for the change that God was bringing about by taking on flesh in her womb. In her Son - heaven and earth are united and the renewal of humanity and all creation has begun. In her child, God's Kingdom has come and God's will is being done on earth as it is heaven. In her Son, the world is forever changed, turned upside down. So, Mary boldly sings of what God has done, especially for people we don't normally think of as being blessed. Mary sings for the lowly, the dispossessed, the hungry and the poor, people like her, claiming that in her womb grows the one who will upend the kingdoms of this world and all their posturing and pretension. That her Son, God in the flesh, will be bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty, liberation for the oppressed, healing for the broken-hearted, and a Way in the wilderness for the lost. "This is a song of revolution, a carol that makes the likes of Herod fear for their very lives. Mary sings the music of Christmas because in her womb is the very Lord of all creation, God has come to Mary, and through her to Israel, and to all the nations."⁵ Mary's song essentially says, "This is the way God is – lover of the poor, protector of the downtrodden, savior of the lowly. And we ought to get in step with God's way, or else be horribly out of step with reality now that the Son of God is taking over the world."⁶ And in as much as our lives resemble Mary's song we share in her blessedness. If we sing this song with Mary then our communities, our churches, must become outposts of the Kingdom, places where the change and blessing that Jesus brings is lived out, communities in which the lowly are lifted up, where pride is scattered, truth is spoken to power, the hungry are filled with good things and those who seek only their own well-being are called to account. Because real blessedness comes from being like Mary and humbly welcoming the Son of God to come and dwell within us, to be born in us, and to use us to turn the world upside-down, not only at Christmas, but each and every day. Amen.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 128.