

December 1st, 2024
First Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26-38; Isaiah 43:1-7 “You Are a Blessing”

We have two scriptures on the table this morning. One is from a prophet in the Old Testament, and one is from Luke’s gospel in the New Testament. Believe it or not, they both have a common theme. One is about God assuring the people of Israel that the trials they’re facing in captivity are temporary. The other is about an angel telling a young woman that she will give birth to the Son of God. The connection is that both passages offer hope and assurance to people who are facing the unknown. Both contain the phrase, “Do not be afraid.” You want to know how many times that phrase shows up in the Bible? Three-hundred sixty-five times -- enough to have an assurance for each day of the year! That’s great considering that we all wake up on any given day not knowing what to fully expect. Now, we may have a *good idea* about what will happen based on whatever our default norm is. Get up. Have breakfast. Go to work. Do your job. Go home. Have dinner. Do whatever business you have to keep your home-life running smoothly. You close the day by doing something you enjoy – reading a book, watching a show, working on a project. Then you go to sleep and start all over the next day. Now of course, there are variables depending on what kind of work you do, whether you have pets or kids, or whether you’re retired or single or married. I’m just using this schedule as an example. We *sort of* know what to expect. Not always.

There are days when circumstances change, and surprise! Your life gets turned upside down. Maybe you’re suddenly unemployed. Maybe you or someone in your family is dealing with health-related issues. Maybe you have a falling out with a friend or family member. Maybe you have some daunting task ahead of you that you’re not sure how to work through. Those are the days when you say, “I’m not sure how I’m going to get through this day, this season, this year, this *life*.” Some might say, “I don’t know how I’m going to get through this, God, but I could use an

extra measure of Holy Spirit energy today.” And others might say, “I’m not even sure that God knows what I’m going through or is even listening when I say, ‘Help, I don’t know what to do!’” Wouldn’t it be nice to have an angel show up and say, “Do not be afraid. It’s going to be alright.” Wouldn’t it be assuring to run into a prophet who says, “Hang in there. Help is on the way.”

Today is the first day of the church’s new year. Really? I thought that was in January. Well, the church calendar doesn’t quite line up with the calendar that the rest of the world uses. It’s close. But the church calendar begins before the winter solstice so that for the next few weeks, each day will have more darkness than light. And it’s no fun starting and ending the workday when it’s dark. We do what we can to add a little extra light in our lives to offset the darkness. Mary has candles all over the house. On cold evenings, we have a fire in the fireplace. Some people say, “Well that’s not a very efficient way to heat your home.” True, but it’s aesthetically pleasing. It’s another source of light when the nights are longer than the days. Some people suffer from seasonal affective disorder and struggle with depression because there’s not enough sunlight. Some even use special lamps that simulate the sun’s light to gain a little more UV energy to get through the darkness of winter. Heck of a way to start the church year, right? Let’s remind everyone how dark it is. Good grief, pastor, can you not just sit back and enjoy the lights and the holiday decorations and all the baked goods your wife seems to produce during this time of year? Yes. I can. And I do. But sometimes I can’t. I imagine it’s that way with most of us. I suppose that’s part of the logic for starting the church year so early – so we can look forward to the light that is to come.

Most scholars agree that Jesus was not born on December 25th, but this is the time of year that the church chose to recognize and celebrate the coming of the Christ-child. Now, if you can believe it, celebrating the birth of Jesus wasn’t even a thing until 300 years after the church was established. But think about it for a minute. Jesus’ birth is only mentioned in two of the four gospels. Even the messianic texts in the

Old Testament were more interested in what the Messiah would accomplish as an adult. Crucifixion and resurrection? Now that's always been a big deal for the church. All four gospels give us an account of this, and Paul mentions it quite a few times in his letters to the early churches. Easter, or resurrection day? *That* is the high holy day in the Christian tradition. You know who made Christmas a big deal? Emperor Constantine of Rome. Yep. My boy Constantine. The one responsible for transforming a home-grown spiritual movement into a religious institution. Thanks buddy! He made a big deal out of Christmas because he was concerned that the pagans were getting all the attention with their super-cool winter festivals. Anyway, I'm getting way too close to spoiling what Pastor Gail and I are cooking up for our candlelight service on the 24th, so let's get back to the texts we have in front of us this morning.

"Do not be afraid." "Fear not, the Lord is with you." This is one of the lessons we can learn from these two scriptures. The other is, "You are a blessing." In Isaiah, the prophet tells Israel that their purpose ... their destiny is to be a blessing for others. In Luke, the Angel Gabriel told Mary that she is a blessing and that her son will also be a blessing. I think this notion that someone can be a blessing is understated in the church. We are God's people, therefore we are a blessing. You are a blessing. Say that to your neighbor ... "You are a blessing." Did that feel weird? If it did, it's because the church has gotten into the habit of focusing on our sinful nature – and don't get me wrong, that's a real thing. Paul, did say that "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." That doesn't mean that we're not a blessing to God though. I think churches avoid talking about our blessedness because it thinks we ought not to think too highly of ourselves. Far more often, we are told – implicitly and explicitly – that we are a burden. Our blessedness is a message that can easily be muted, trivialized or erased altogether. Hustle culture, scarcity thinking, racism, sexism, all of the "isms" are forces that make us believe that we're *not* a blessing. When we stop believing that we are a blessing to God, then we might stop believing this about others too.

Even in Biblical times, people struggled with this. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was blessed and that God chose her to bear the Christ-child, her first reaction was, “How can this be?” I mean sure, she was probably referring to the biological improbability, but she was also wondering how an ordinary girl from the outback of Nazareth who was not clothed in power or prestige could be called “blessed.” How could God select someone that the rest of the world might overlook to be part of something so special? Gabriel’s words, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” isn’t just a formality, it’s a declaration of Mary’s essential place in the divine story. Yes, but aren’t we supposed to earn our worth? Aren’t we supposed to earn God’s love? That seems to be how the world works. Earn your keep. Be a producer. You’re just a drag on society if you don’t have something significant to contribute. And yet the one who gives us the gift of life is constantly affirming our worth. We don’t have to work to earn God’s compassion. It’s already there. When you’re facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it’s not our productivity that pushes us through, it’s God’s grace.

Mind you, this divine assurance doesn’t clarify every outcome or guarantee an easy life. Mary’s path, like many before and after, was filled with huge challenges. Yet this promise of love invites us to live out our blessedness and belovedness ... by transforming our interactions and our communities. Did you say, “our belovedness?” Yes. Turn to your neighbor and say, “You are loved.” Does that sound weird? I hope it doesn’t. In fact, I hope that’s what you needed to hear today. God’s perfect love invites us to live out our belovedness by transforming the world with love and entering into the good and creative work that God started from the very beginning. You are blessed. You are loved. These are words for a new beginning as we enter this season of Advent. May we learn to embrace our blessedness and belovedness.

Benediction – You are a blessing – known, chosen, and called for a purpose. May you boldly live into that truth, recognizing and cherishing your inherent worth so that you may honor God’s image in others. Trust your blessedness and belovedness as you enter the redemptive work God has invited you into this advent season.