

“You Are A Blessing”  
Luke 1:26-38  
The First Sunday of Advent  
December 1, 2024  
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Here we are at the end. And yet, we are beginning.

We are at the end of the year—and what a year it’s been! And yet, we are beginning a new church year, beginning a new season called “advent,” which means the arrival of something or someone significant.

We are in the darkest days, literally, of life in the northern hemisphere. Those darkest days will peak with the Longest Night of the year on December 20-21, the winter solstice. And yet, we are in a time of year when many put up strands of lights outside their homes to brighten neighborhoods and hearts.

Around us the leaves on deciduous trees have mostly fallen, and many gardens have been prepared for overwintering. And yet, many people bring evergreens into their homes to adorn with lights and candles and symbols dear to them in celebration.

Endings and beginnings are deceptive, because in the circle of the church year and in the cycle of living, these are not finite points in time, but endings and beginnings flow into one another endlessly.

Our Advent theme this year, “Words for the Beginning” highlights this truth of intermingling ends and beginnings. When the angel visits Mary, calling her “favored one” and declaring she has been chosen to bear the Son of God, and Mary consents, something new begins deep in Mary’s body and spirit. But knowing that Mary was likely a teenage girl, unwed but betrothed, in a small village in Galilee, an out-of-the-way place away from the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem in Judea, we can also guess that she was surrounded by endings. Galilee was occupied by the Roman Empire, governed by the opportunistic and corrupt Herodians, and was known for being a place of resistance to empire. In the weeks to come as we revisit the advent of Jesus in this plane of existence, we also revisit the stories of a power-hungry monarch committing genocide; simple shepherds being among the first to hear good news; women rejoicing together; a man considering ending his engagement to avoid social shame but being called by God to parent God’s own child. Endings and beginnings all over the place.

Our worship themes for each Sunday in advent are statements of simple truths that we can grab onto, that can ground us, in this season where navigating life can be complex. All of us need reminders of who we are and how we are called to be and what we can affect in times where endings and beginnings are mixed up together, entwined, and tied in knots.

So we hope that the words we share today and in the coming weeks will offer you some rootedness in the midst of this madly spinning world.

As always, we begin with love. We begin with reminding one another, “you are a blessing.”

That's what began Mary's story. An angelic visitor saying, “Greetings, favored one. You are blessed by the Holy.” This otherworldly messenger declares Mary blessed, even though she is young, even though she is poor, even though she is from a place not many people gave much thought. In *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, Kelley Nikondeha emphasizes how Mary of Galilee is an unlikely vessel for God's incarnation. She writes:

“... the God who goes to unexpected places—to the north, when all expect south; to lowly priests with no sons—this God can go to an unlikely girl in an unlikely place shaped by resistance and maybe even trauma. God shows favor, demonstrating again and again in infinite reversals that human taboo and stigma don't limit the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

If Mary, multiply marginalized and as unlikely a “chosen one” as there could be, is blessed and beloved by God, then we must remember that we are, too.

In our world today, there are many things that try to convince us that we are not a blessing, that we are not enough to be loved, to be worthy of time and energy and money, to be called precious in God's sight. Capitalism, scarcity-thinking, hustle-culture, obsession with productivity, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism...these are all tools that Empire uses to divide us from one another and to keep us feeling our worth is low...so low we must hate someone who has more than us, so low we must out-produce one another to claim our worth, so low we must buy-buy-buy to fill the place in our hearts hungry for acceptance, so low we must be suspicious of anyone who lives or loves or thinks or feels or practices their religion differently from us.

But Mary—her life, her human skepticism, her consent to participating in God's work, her labor, is a testament to blessing.

Kayla Craig, writing in a commentary for this worship series, says,

“In this moment of divine mystery, Gabriel offers a blessed reassurance [to Mary]: “Do not be afraid.” When we wonder if our quiet worries or loud wonderings matter in the vast expanse of the cosmos, these words remind us that God knows our wandering hearts, acknowledges our fears, and moves toward us.”

God was not off-put by Mary's low social status. God did not withdraw the blessing when Mary asked “how can this be?” Instead, God's messenger said the most common four words in the entire Bible: “do not be afraid” and reached out to confirm Mary's blessedness. God's love came near to Mary in all of her profoundly messy humanity and said “yes” to Mary's “yes.”

Again, Kayla Craig:

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<sup>1</sup> *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, Kelley Nikondeha, 48

“We often feel compelled to earn our worth and belovedness, but the One who grants each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God’s infinite love, we are beloved, the very fibers of our being woven with care. We can’t work our way to receiving God’s compassion. It’s already there—as present as the twinkling stars in the sky, as near as the clouds of breath on a cold night.”

When you are facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it’s not your productivity or power that will push you through, but the grace of God. This divine assurance doesn’t clarify every outcome or guarantee a life of ease—Mary’s path, like many before and after, was fraught with challenges. Yet this promise of Love that makes a way when there is no way offers us hope that we do not face our challenges alone.”

Beloved church, you are a blessing.

You. Yes you, right there in the pews, worshipping online, watching later, passing by on the street and wondering if you’d be welcome to come in...YOU.

Are. Not were, not will-be-if-you-are-good-enough. You ARE.

A blessing. A miracle, a gift, a delightful surprise, an honored one, dearly loved.

You are a blessing.

You are a blessing to me, to this church, to those who know you, to those whom you will come to know in the future. You are a blessing to this world, to the human story, to God’s own heart.

So do not fear, dear ones.

As Marianne Williamson in *A Return to Love*, said,

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

As we journey with Mary through this season, we are journeying with her humanity and our own; her fallibility and our own; her questions and our own; her fullness and our own; her blessedness and our own. Encountering her blessedness, her light, is liberative because it illumines our light, as candles do when they bend and share the flame, passing it one to another.

So what now?

Now, go and share the light. Go now and liberate others. Go now and declare to all who will listen, and even those who won't, that they are a blessing. Sometimes we just need someone else to see us the way God sees us, as a blessing, and that can lift us up out of whatever's got us down, even just a little. Sometimes that makes all the difference in how we see ourselves and what we can offer in our lives and in our communities.

Kayla Craig leaves us with these words today:

“Advent invites us to reflect on how we, like Mary, are invited into God’s redemptive narrative—no matter how ordinary or small we might feel—for each of us has the potential to carry God’s love into a weary world.”

So let’s begin our advent journey together, as we prepare to welcome the good news coming soon, as we dust off our lights and let them shine, as we take up the gift of our blessedness and use it to gift to others.

Dear church, you are blessed and beloved. You are enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.

#### Benediction

As you leave this place,  
may you have the wisdom to lean on one other.  
May you have the courage to hold onto hope,  
the compassion to do the good that is yours to do,  
and the confidence to trust that God sees you as a blessing.

For in a world full of dead ends,  
Advent invites us to begin again.  
So start here.  
Start now.  
Start with love and begin again.  
In the name of Christ,  
our new beginning,  
go in peace.