

*Words for the Beginning – You Are A Blessing - Luke 1:26-38*

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Advent is a season of beginnings. As the calendar year comes to a close, a new church year begins today. Christ's birth ushers us into new ways of living and loving; and yet, the world as we know it spins madly on. In many ways, pregnant Mary was surrounded by endings—large and small, personal and political. But Mary proclaimed hope in a God who was and is making all things new.

When we navigate seasons of endings and beginnings, we need words that can feel like steady ground, like a path for our feet to find as we step forward into the unknown.

This Advent, we will be focusing on some words we need to hear again and again as we begin a new season. They are words we should hold fast to for the journey ahead.

We begin the series today with a reminder that all of us should carry with us every day.

You know, we preachers toss out the word “blessing” all the time. We’re coming off a season of thanksgiving, where our abundant “blessings” serve as the impetus for our tremendous gratitude. It’s oh-so-true, and therefore it’s proclaimed, rightly, over and over.

We also have no problem telling somebody how so-and-so is a blessing to us. “He or she is such a blessing to this church, or to this community, or to this office.” That’s not unusual to hear either.

What’s more rare is hearing and accepting that WE are a blessing. Even if we get lauded with praise for what we’ve done

or how we've acted, sometimes we lose sight of what we are: a blessing. Filled with flaws, but at the same time, a blessing.

And of course, there are those who never are lauded for anything. In fact, society may see them as simply discarded scraps. They live on the margins—scorned and forgotten by society. They, too, though are blessings.

So, for everybody—the lauded and respected, and the forgotten and downtrodden—the reminder should not grow dim: You Are A Blessing.

Consider Mary, the one whom the angel told would give birth to a child who would be the Messiah. God selected someone the world might overlook to be part of something beautiful.

Gabriel's message, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you," isn't merely a formality but a declaration of Mary's essential place in God's world. She is the "favored one." Mary.

Mary was an unlikely vessel for God's incarnation.

The scholar Kelley Nikondeha writes this: "Jewish ears must have burned when they heard Luke's Gospel mention a girl from Galilee." She explains that the northern region was known for uprisings and protests, and they were considered "lesser Jews" there because many were uncircumcised or did not worship in the temple or married non-Jewish people.

"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."

Mary was the favored one. And all because of the grace of God.

Mary, just like all of us, didn't earn her blessedness, her favor. We often feel compelled to earn those things, but the One who grants us each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God's infinite love, we are beloved. We can't work our way to receiving God's compassion. It's already with us.

From the beginning, we have been considered a blessing.

Billie Fain died this past week. She was 93 and a long-time member of this congregation—although due to health problems was not active in the church for many years.

Her son, David, had many health challenges as a child that caused him to suffer from brain damage into adulthood.

He was unable to speak and initially was unable to walk. His mother and father worked hard to insure David and others in the community had services and education to help children and young adults with disabilities to insure they were able to live independently or with care as needed to meet their goals and aspirations. They succeeded with David who eventually learned to walk and ride a large tricycle and communicate with sign language.

Throughout her life, Billie worked to ensure that David and others like him were recognized as the blessings they were.

In the 1950's, there were virtually no programs and activities to assist those with developmental disabilities. It was common for doctors to tell parents that the best place for their child was an institution. The ARC, an organization that advocates for, empowers, and promotes full participation for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, helped to change this as they wanted these children and young adults to lead

fulfilling lives in the community and not to be isolated in institutions.

Billie Fain joined the board of ARC of Anderson County decades ago and served as its executive director. Her service at ARC not only helped her son, David, but also helped numerous children and young adults in Anderson County.

Billie also traveled to all elementary schools in Anderson County and many in Knox county to present a program called Kids on the Block, one of the first puppet programs to educate children about disabilities and to increase understanding and attitudes about those with disabilities.

Billie Fain wanted children with disabilities (including her own son) and people in our communities to recognize that people with disabilities have names and that they, too, are blessings. They are favored ones, too.

What a noble calling she had!

God said in Isaiah 43, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine.”

To Mary who was called to give birth to the Messiah, to Billie Fain’s son, David, and to every person with a disability, to the outcast, to the poor, to the wealthy and to the accomplished, God would say, “You are mine. You are a blessing.”

When we are facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it’s not our productivity or power that will push us 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. As we journey into Advent, may we rest under the warmth of this wonderful reality: we are a blessing.