

## **Riverside United Church – December 1, 2024**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent**

#### **Scripture:**

#### **Luke 1:26-38**

#### **The Birth of Jesus Foretold**

In the sixth month (of Elizabeth's pregnancy) the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

#### **Isaiah 43: 1-7**

#### **Restoration and Protection Promised**

But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honoured, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.  
Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;  
I will say to the north, 'Give them up',  
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.'

### **Sermon: Words for the Beginning – You Are a Blessing**

**Karen Percy**

Today marks the start of the season of Advent, a season of endings and beginnings. Throughout the Advent season, we will explore a worship series called *Words for the Beginning* from Sanctified Art. This worship planning resource is the same one as *Our Money Story* that we just finished exploring, as well as the one we used during Lent and last Christmas.

As we ourselves navigate seasons filled with endings and beginnings, we need reminders. We need to repeatedly hear words that will help steady us as we step forward into the unknown and into a new season. We start this series exploring blessedness, for this is Mary's beginning and it is ours as well. Let us pray.

*God of Hope, we ready ourselves to listen to your Word, we are hungry for your wisdom, speak to us now with hope and curiosity, so that with the same hope, the same curiosity, we dare to begin again. In this we pray. Amen. (Adapted from a prayer by the Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed, A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org)*

In this morning's text, we heard from the Gospel of Luke that Mary received a visit from the angel Gabriel who foretold of Jesus' birth. Mary's initial reaction is of disbelief that she will be the one to bear this child of God. Quite a natural reaction given the circumstances.

Though Mary has great faith, she questions the plausibility of the news that the angel is sharing with her. In the beginning, she is doubtful and asks Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am still a virgin?" This question underscores that Mary questions her own blessedness. She doesn't understand why she would be the one blessed with such a gift as to bring the child of God into this world.

The angel declares, "Greetings favoured one! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, as you have found favour with God." And at this moment, this messenger

of God is not only telling Mary that she is indeed blessed, but that God is also with her in that moment and the moments to come. And as many times as I heard this story, I do not think it registered that it was not just the angel that was with Mary at that moment – but God was also with Mary. God was there in the ending of her girlhood and in the beginning of her blessed journey of bringing God’s son into the world.

Though our situation is vastly different to that of Mary’s, at times, we too fail to see our own blessedness, we are quick to brush off a compliment or when someone recognizes one of our spiritual gifts. We ask the same question as Mary, “How can this be?” The unspoken question being asked here is why would God choose me?

A few of us here might have experienced something similar when learning that we have won a raffle ticket. Though we heard the announcer call out “our” numbers and we see them lined up with our eyes – we still disbelieve that we could have been so lucky, so blessed to have won. We hold the same feelings of incredulousness as Mary. “How can this be?”

It is understandable why Mary would question what the angel was proclaiming to her. After all, she is a young, unwed virgin of humble beginnings, who does not come from a family of royalty or of great wealth. She is right, society would not have chosen such a girl from an obscure corner of Nazareth to be blessed to be the vessel for God’s beloved child. She was not cloaked in power nor prestige, but she was clothed in belovedness. God chose her and in doing so shows us that the God who goes into unexpected places – to the north when all expect the south – this God that went to an unlikely girl, once again shows us that taboo and stigma does not limit the Spirit.

So many times, in life, in a variety of contexts, the message of being a burden, unworthy or unlovable has been implicitly or explicitly told to us whether it be by society, racism, even family members or friends have given us many reasons as to why we believe that we are not a blessing. When we hear this message of unworthiness too often, we start to believe this message to be true – maybe we are not loveable, maybe we are not a blessing. When we fail to see ourselves as such it directly impacts our ability to see others as a blessing and a beloved child of God.

Mary is someone of great faith, and this narrative shows us it is ok to have doubts and questions. Her questions of how all of this will transpire as she has not been with a man, shows us that a God-filled relationship has room for questions. The angel did not balk at her or belittle her for having questions. Quite the contrary, instead space was made for Mary’s questions. Otherwise, the story would have been heard as the angel showed up, proclaimed his news, and went on his merry way.

Luke’s Gospel this morning clearly indicates this incident transpiring in a very conversational style. The angel shows up, Mary asks questions, further information is provided and Mary consents. Mary’s questions of “Why me? Why should I be blessed?” shows us that we too can be a person of faith or someone who is just discovering faith and has doubts and questions. Even being in a faith-filled relationship and being a

willing participant in the mystery of life – questions do not mean a lack of faith. Mary's question "How can this be?" makes up the fabric of one of the greatest mysteries of our faith story.

In starting my own path towards ministry, I too felt like Mary. I asked my own questions of "How can this be? Why me?" You see, I was quite happy going to church, sitting in a pew, and minding my own business. I did not need, nor want to be, front and centre. Not understanding "why me?" nor how any of this was going to unfold, I was quick to doubt. I, like Mary, did not believe what I was hearing.

Last Saturday, several members of our congregation participated in a community outreach program called Out from the Cold. There we prepared and served meals while offering hospitality to those in need. It was such a humbling and rewarding volunteer experience that fostered a richer understanding of what a blessing it is to serve. For it is in giving that we receive.

It is a blessing to be part of a ministry team here at Riverside United Church who actively seek ways to serve and connect with others in our wider community. It is a blessing to serve a warm meal to others, to offer a drink of water or juice to those who thirst. It is a blessing to offer articles of clothing that people from our congregation and the wider community have generously donated to this program.

What I appreciate about Mary's story is that it reminds us that we too are a beloved child of God, each of us precious to God, each of us uniquely blessed and called by name to be of service in our own way. To be like Mary and embrace our own individual role as to how we can be servants of God, agents of hope in a hurting and weary world; this is what it means to be blessed to be called a servant of God; this is what acting out our faith looks like. This is what it means to be blessed.

While volunteering last weekend, I had a unique experience that will undoubtedly stay with me for some time. Someone asked me if I would help them try on a pair of boots. I did not answer right away. I must admit, my first reaction was to decline. The person asked me a second time if I would help them put on a pair of boots. She explained how she needed a pair of boots and felt blessed to be so lucky to find the ones there that night that seemed just her size. This lady shared they had difficulty bending, problems with her feet and was unable to remove their shoes to try on the boots. Her next words, "Karen, you will help me, won't you?"

I can tell you that one little question, "Karen, you will help me, won't you?" that struck something deep within me. One stranger before me, one in need, asking for help and I was considering saying no.

I consider myself as someone having faith and who tries hard to be a good Christian. Scripture tells us Jesus said, "Surely I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these...you did it to me." Yet, here I was, reluctant to meaningfully serve the one before me. I could not answer her question if I would help her, yet I know I hesitated to

help. I was struggling to put into words why I would not help this person. If I were in her shoes, I would want someone to help me and I'm sure you would want someone to help you if you were in that place. Here I was someone claiming to be a Christian, believing that I am an agent of God, called to share God's love of all to those I meet and yet I was having difficulty to help this stranger before me.

In the moments that lapsed, which seemed like a lifetime in my quiet questioning, I saw this stranger, looking at me, calling me by name, calling me to be who God made me to be. I held her gaze for a few moments before I responded, "Yes, I will help you." Honestly, to see her smile and to hear the words, "God bless you Karen" coming from her mouth to my heart was a powerful moment. To see her face, filled with joy that the boots did fit, she felt blessed in that moment to have warm winter boots, and I felt blessed to have removed her shoes. I felt a lot like Mary at that moment. Whatever did I do to deserve this blessed moment?

I share this story not to seek praise but to highlight that just as we heard in Luke this morning, God continues to ask ordinary souls to do extraordinary work. So many times, in life, it is much easier to see that someone else can receive a blessing, but we fail to see that we too are worthy of being blessed. It seems Holy Maker who has made and formed us understood this human tendency to be open to someone else receiving a blessing, all the while doubting or forgetting that Holy Maker made us too; and we too are beloved and precious in their sight. The angel shares with Mary that her cousin Elizabeth, who is said to be advanced in her years and well past her child-bearing days, has conceived a son. No doubt understanding the moment and to help calm her fears, the angel reminds Mary, reminds us, "For nothing will be impossible for God."

This morning's scripture reading did not convey how much time was allotted to the entire conversation or how Mary struggled with this decision. Luke simply states that after Mary spoke with the angel, she consented with the words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." In reading the First Nation's Indigenous Version of this text, it reads as, "It seemed like time stood still and all creation stopped to listen as the messenger continued to speak." This translation captures a more accurate rendering of that odd and wondrous blessed incident. It also offers us an understanding of how there was a pause before Mary consented. Her response was translated as, "She looked bravely into the face of the messenger. 'I am Creator's servant,' she said with boldness. Let it be for me just as you have said." This translation shows us that consenting to embark on a new beginning, to be a servant of God is one that takes a boldness of character to accept to go where Creator is calling us to serve. This response from Mary shows that we have been wonderfully made by Creator, that we are beloved, and have been blessed with living with free choice.

To see our own faith story as that of Mary's - as consenting to be a servant to God; not a servant to be in a submissive role but to be one who is personally choosing to serve God. If we could embrace Mary's delight in being of service, boldly daring to go forward, to embark on a new beginning, a fresh start, with only our faith to guide us, would this embolden us to live out our faith differently? Would it make it easier to see

the face of God in the stranger before us or to discover our unique calling to know how we are blessed to serve?

Being blessed to be called to serve looks different for each one of us. It can be seen each time we bring in donations to share with the Brookfield Community Food Cupboard, each time we reach out with compassion to someone who is grieving or who is going through health issues. Feeling blessed could be when you have a supportive learning site that with each new beginning, makes room for unsteady steps and uncertainty, all the while offering encouraging words along the way. Feeling blessed could also be when you have a supervising minister who shares their knowledge and experience, who allows me to be me, while guiding me to discover who God made me to be. When we feel blessed, we want to share our blessings of plenty with others. Last Saturday, I realized that being called to serve looks differently each day. Some days we struggle to find a way to help someone. Other times, the call to serve is ignored. Daily, unconsciously, or consciously we make these decisions in a split second, whether we will be of service.

We are reminded this morning that just like Mary we are gently and lovingly invited into a relationship to serve God. God was with Mary as she embarked on a new beginning of her life, discovering what it means to be called to serve God, soon to be carrying God's love into the world, to become married and to nurture God's love – God was with her in the beginning of the journey and will continue to journey with Mary throughout all the chapters of her life. But you see the blessing of this news is that this is not just reserved for Mary! God journeys with each of us, each a blessing and a beloved, precious child of God.

So, whatever new beginning waits for each of us, the Spirit of Love invites this Advent season to recognize that we all have the potential to carry God's love into a weary world. May our faith move us as it moved Mary, stirring within us a desire to boldly start a new hope-filled journey, calling us to trust that the love of God is with us from the very beginning. No matter what we are facing, no matter what the day brings, let us remember that we are blessed, and that love is our beginning. Amen.