

SERMON
“May You Have a Blessed Christmas?”
Becky Hebert and Chuck Gackstetter
December 20, 2009
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Luke 1: 39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

SERMON

Becky: Once upon what seems like forever ago, I was engrossed regularly in conversations with other seminarians. One day a friend of mine and I decided to tape such a conversation and make it into a dialogue sermon. What follows is that conversation—with a few revisions—in order to include Chuck Gackstetter in that conversation. Chuck, would you please come forward to join me in doing a dialogue sermon?

Becky: There was once a young, unwed woman who was told that she was pregnant and unwed. And the angel Gabriel calls her blessed. Can you believe that?! And Elizabeth, her cousin, calls her blessed. Even Mary, the unwed, pregnant woman, describes herself as *blessed* as she burst forth to proclaim the words of the Magnificat.

Chuck: I'm sorry that I'm not young enough to have been in that group of seminarians with you. I don't know how I would have reacted then to Mary's place in my faith. I probably would have followed the Evangelical and Reformed catechism I had learned that gave Mary short shrift.

Now I see that to fully appreciate Mary's Song, you need to see it in terms of what the author of Luke and Acts was saying about the breaking of—the literal arrival of—the kingdom of heaven, which he saw as the

whole point of the Jesus Event. The songs of Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist) and Simeon—the one who said, “let your servant depart in peace now that I’ve seen the salvation you have planned”—make the same point as does Mary’s song. They all show what can happen when you allow God’s spirit to evolve you to a higher level of humanity—being able to trust God even in the worst circumstances. Jesus probably learned to trust God’s unconditional love unconditionally from Mary.

Becky: Mary never seemed real to me. If anything, my visions of Mary were of formless plaster statues and emotionless Madonnas. I had long ago dismissed her from my thinking.

Then one day a friend confronted me with the beauty and the power of the Magnificat, the song of Mary. Shortly thereafter, while Mary was still on my mind, Professor Routt raised the question, “How is Jesus different?” *(As an aside to congregation)* Professor Routt taught theology, and he seemed to think it was his duty to pose theological questions that tore at the very fiber of our beliefs.

Well, there was nothing difficult about this question. Jesus is different because he was the Son of God...God incarnate. We all know that. “Yes, sure,” said Dr. Routt. “But how?!” We paused... thinking.

Routt answered, “Jesus did not drag his feet. He did the will of God with no resistance whatever. He was completely attuned to, and at one with, God.”

Suddenly, the question hit me. Wasn't that also true of Mary? How then, is Mary different from Jesus?

Chuck: Of course it was true of Mary. I see Jesus and Mary as the same. They are both “blessed,” they are both “happy” in biblical language. They both have allowed themselves to trust in God's good will. Jesus' distinction from most humans was that trust that allowed him to see beyond the pain and death. For this Jesus is Blessed. The author of Luke has the angel declare that Mary is blessed. We're supposed to see that her acceptance of having an illegitimate baby, her not being able to understand what the kid was doing sometimes—like in the Temple, and then her seeing him go off when he's grown to wander the countryside and not support his family—all show an openness to trust God.

Can't you just hear some of the self-righteous folk in town talking about Mary's first-born son...conceived out of wedlock? Imagine their delight when Jesus leaves and they meet Mary at the well! “So, Mary, how is YOUR boy doing?”

Becky: Yes, and I can hear Mary saying, ‘Well, he’s OK. He’s out...preaching.’”

Chuck: “Oh, you mean he’s got a church?”

Becky: “No. He just sort of goes from one town to another...with these 12 guys ...”

Chuck: “Just hangs out with guys, huh! Hasn’t married yet? Well, we’re sure that you love him anyway. You can be proud of the other kids, right?”

Becky: And Jesus was blessed ... to live a life which led to the cross?

Chuck: I seem to hear an anticipation of Gethsemane years later. What did Mary say at the end of her conversation with the angel? Help me out here. What does she say?

Becky: “Let it be, according to your word.”

Chuck: And in the garden, Jesus’ prayer demonstrates the same trust: “Not my will, but Yours be done.” He’s NOT saying that God wills his death. He’s saying, “I know that whatever the Romans do to me, you can be trusted to be with me through it all...and beyond.”

Becky: Does that leave us with “blessedness” being a docile, compliant, passive instrument of God’s will? No, I don’t think so, for that concept doesn’t match the image in Luke of the young, Hebrew woman

from the small village of Nazareth, with no formal education...arguing with an angel. “How can this be?”

Docile and compliant are not apparent attributes in the radical, autonomous decision-making of this young woman who hears God’s call and responds positively. She doesn’t ask advice of her father or of her fiancé, as was the custom in that society. Rather, she thinks for herself... makes her own decision...and boldly asserts, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord!” Hey, I’m starting to like this Mary.

Chuck: We all should. Just as we would like anybody who demonstrates the kind of trust Jesus shows. Oh, he does have his struggles of the soul. He prays, “Abba, if you’re willing, remove this cup from me.” And the heavenly father does not perform the miracle of saving his son—but does give him the ability to trust...and that gives him the strength to deal with the worst the Romans and his disciples can throw at him.

The author wants us to get the point: Trusting God isn’t easy. None of us can do it on our own. Only God’s power—the Holy Spirit—can make it possible...and that is the BLESSING Jesus and Mary shared, just as we can.

Becky: Two images. There are two images of “blessedness.” The first is from the beginning of the Christmas story. The other, from the end. Mary and Joseph were blessed with the call into the responsibilities of parenthood. Jesus was blessed with the call to Calvary. Therein is the difference.

The first is an image of a woman giving birth...with all the agony of labor and delivery. And her response to God’s call didn’t end with the birth of her baby. Oh no. It carries with it all the rewards and hardships of nurturing a child. Of forming love into living flesh and bones...of caring for him...and helping him grow.

Chuck: Mary is called to give Jesus life, in order that he might give us the gift of life that comes from trusting God...unconditionally. She was called on to give him love, in order that he might demonstrate the power of ...unconditional love.

Becky: Are we saying that without family, without this community of love, Jesus might not have been able to give these gifts?

Chuck: Exactly! Are you saying that the difference between Mary and Jesus is measured by the degree of self-denial and agony that each endured?

Becky: No, I don't think so. I mean, after all, Mary was willing to set aside her own desires...her own plans and hopes. She was willing to relinquish all that she was in exchange for being a part of God's continuing creation.

Chuck: Parenthood certainly carries with it the redefinition of individuality, time, and opportunity. There are the frustrations of life lived for another. The interruptions. The errands. The housework. Sleep deprivation.

Becky: Then there's Mary at the foot of the cross...watching her first born child being crucified...killed. The mother in me cringes whenever I think about having to be in that position.

Chuck: That's why I put my wife, daughter, granddaughter...all the people I know...into God's keeping. It's a discipline that reminds me daily, that God's will is always good and can be trusted—no matter what the world might do to them. If I didn't remind myself that God IS on our side, the anxieties would just be too much for me. That's what Mary and Jesus both did. That's why I don't see much difference between Mary and Jesus.

Becky: But there is a difference. Certainly Jesus is more exalted than Mary. Maybe the difference has something to do with Jesus' redefinition of family. He strung out, to the breaking point, the concept of kinship.

Family...he no longer defined biologically. Jesus claimed as members of his family, those who shared his vision and acted accordingly. When he is surrounded by followers, hounded by critics, and pursued by his frightened, concerned mother and family members, Jesus answers the question, "Who are my mother and brother?", by saying, "They are those who do the will of God!"

His "cultural family" members were not excluded in his definition, nor were they condemned as unimportant. He simply put forth that the "faith family," the Church universal, is ultimately more important. Mary may have been willing to die for members of her family, but Jesus was willing to die so that all of humanity could become family.

Chuck: I don't agree that there is a difference. I see both Mary and Jesus as being able to accept many kinds of pain, and many kinds of death, because they accepted the gift of being able to trust God. And that trusting also created FAMILY for them.

Becky: I guess we will never know for sure whether Mary was willing to put her faith family before her own family or not. We only know that she was willing to participate in the cycle that allowed for the opportunity to see, within individual love, a greater love.

From the beginning, she sees within her call a vision of this greater love—which is evident in the song that comes pouring out of her heart. In the Magnificat she tells us of her vision of a future of justice, mercy, equality—with the God Israel scattering the proud and the mighty, and feeding the hungry, and exalting the humble. O yes. Mary is highly exalted and blessed to see such a vision.

Chuck: You just showed that Mary was willing to participate fully in trusting God...just as Jesus was. Many in the church over the years have ascribed a divine element to Jesus' trusting and lessened the importance of Mary's trust (which, by the way, allows us to excuse ourselves for not trusting as we could.)

Becky: Or in the church's efforts to portray hers and Jesus' role in Divine action—the Church lost touch with the very real humanity of both these gentle people. Mary and Jesus were put in an unattainable heavenly realm that allowed them only to be worshiped, depriving us of participation in their humanity, and hence, in God's creative-liberating activity.

In recent times, Jesus' humanity has been reclaimed. But Protestants have nearly thrown Mary out as unimportant in the scheme of things. Catholics left her high on a pedestal.

Chuck: Which brings us back to the fact that the whole concept of “blessedness” is the issue. There are not really two images of “blessedness.” There is only one for Mary, Jesus, and us—unconditional trust—which is the only rightful response to God’s un-conditional love for us.

Becky: The Church is called to participate in the Mothering activity of giving birth (new life), of nurturing, of loving, and of letting go, so that the members of God’s family can be sent forth to participate in the ongoing activity of God in the world.

Chuck: So Mary had a vision. She heard God’s call. She questioned that call but through trust discovered that there is something more out there...something that loves us unconditionally.

Becky: And Mary found it. That is why she was so excited, so radiant. Some people struggle a lifetime to find “it”. Blessedness. The spiritual realm of life. Transformation. An assurance of having made contact with their God.

Chuck: Yet to be blessed with that assurance didn’t lead Mary to a life on easy street. She had only a faint idea of the suffering in store. Would she have responded in the way that she did if she knew her vision of equality with Jesus would come at such cost?

Becky: Dietrick Bon Hoeffler wrote: “When Christ calls a person, he bids that person to come and die.”

Chuck: But once the trust owns you, turning back gets very hard. There’s the sense that the incarnation is not fulfilled until it happens in you. Once you agree to the consequences you get the doubt, uncertainty, fear, and tiredness.

Becky: Don’t you think that maybe we’re stretching the idea of the will of God a little far? Or, at least, stretching the whole concept of “blessedness”? We have defined a state of “blessedness” as a positive response to God, and having a vision of God’s future action. Can we describe “blessedness” as also continuing during the resulting struggle, headaches, and heartbreaks?

Chuck: Of course! God doesn’t take away our trusting—our blessing—when we need it the most. Blessedness for Jesus, Mary, and for us means struggle with life itself.

Thanks for letting me be a part of this week-long conversation.

(Chuck leaves.)

Becky: A life of blessedness; first comes life in community and in family, where we are prepared for our calling. The rest of life is a response to that call. For some, the beginning of that call is marked quite clearly.

For others, I suspect, it is far less distinct but involves a gradual awaking...a growing awareness of what needs to be done.

Once we answer the call to follow Christ, we begin to realize we have placed ourselves in total vulnerability—for to surrender fully, to search for God, to search for BLESSEDNESS, to desire transformation—is to willingly relinquish all that we are in order to become all that we can be. My friends, it will be life that feels like you are forever trying to move upstream against the currents of the world—but one in which you suddenly find that sense of peace, joy, happiness, and fulfillment. This is the vision that Mary saw as she rejoiced, singing the Magnificat, and as she knelt beside her newborn babe in that stable—this is the vision she kept in her heart and pondered.

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