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Luke 1:26-38; Isaiah 43:1-7
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You Are A Blessing

Good morning friends. It's a joy to gather together as we approach the beautiful season of Christmas, a time of celebration and reflection. This morning, I want to share a message about being a blessing during this special time, inspired by the words of Scripture and the profound messages of hope they bring.

Recently, I received a letter from an old Young Life friend named Ethan. He shared how my influence helped shape his life during high school and how he continues to grow in his relationship with Christ. What a blessing it was to read his words! They reminded me of the incredible power of words. With our words, we can bless or curse, uplift or tear down. The Apostle John spoke of the power of THE WORD, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were made, and whose birth we celebrate this month.

As we begin the Advent season, let's reflect on the power of words spoken at the time of Jesus' birth—words that brought life not only to Him but to all of us. Each week during Advent, we will hear familiar stories that bring words of hope to a world walking in darkness. Today, let us feast on the words from Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 1:26-38, where the angel Gabriel tells Mary, "You are a blessing."

Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 1:26-38

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush] and Seba in your stead.
4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
6 I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, **27** to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. **28** The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. **30** But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. **31** You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. **36** Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. **37** For no word from God will ever fail.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Let us pray for illumination as we dive into these texts...

There are several things that I want to share as I reflected on these texts. We see that we claimed by a God who knows us and calls us by name. We have

unique purpose that only we can fill. And finally because of Jesus, we can know that God is with us.

First, let's reflect on how we are claimed by a God who knows us and calls us by name. In Isaiah, God reassures His people, saying, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." This profound statement reveals that from the very beginning, God has had a plan for us as His beloved children.

When the angel Gabriel visits Mary, he greets her with, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary, a young girl from Galilee, might have felt insignificant or overlooked. Yet, God saw her as highly favored.

The Hebrew word for redeemed comes from the root *gaal*. It means to purchase, buy back, redeem as from slavery.

The Greek word for favored comes from the root *charitoo*. It means to endue with special honor, to grace, or to be highly favored. Special.

Both imply coming from a sense of low or humble estate and being lifted up. Esteemed.

Author Kelly Nikondeha asserts in her book, *The First Advent in Palestine*, "Jewish ears must have burned when they heard Luke's Gospel mention a girl from Galilee."¹ Because people from Galilee were considered "lesser Jews" as many were uncircumcised, half breeds, were married to Gentiles, or were not allowed to worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

So we can see how Mary may have been perceived by others as a "lesser one," ordinary...small...not important to God. Perhaps Mary had begun to believe those messages herself.

But God saw her as highly favored.

Both Isaiah and Gabriel remind us that our worth does not come from our circumstances or how others perceive us. It comes from the fact that we belong to God. We are cherished and valued simply because we are His.

Mary was a blessing simply because she belonged to God. God created her. Formed her in her mother's womb from the very first moments of conception. She had inherent worth simply because she was. And he summoned her by name. She belonged to God.

Isaiah calls Jacob and Israel precious and honored in God's sight because God loves them.

The Hebrew word for precious comes from the root word *yagar*. It means to be prized, special, or valued. The Hebrew word for honored comes from the root *kabad*. It means to be honored, numerous, or rich.

¹ Kelly Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine Reversals, Resistance, and The Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 39.

So we get this sense that Mary, Jacob, and Israel were cherished and highly thought of.

Do we feel cherished, valued, or thought highly of? If not, what lies did we hear early on that are short circuiting those truths from God?

My friends, God is wild about us. God created us. Knit us together in our mother's womb. Knows every hair on our heads.

We are cherished, favored, highly thought of...beloved.

Along with this belovedness comes a unique purpose. Each of us has a specific role to play in God's plan. Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord. "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a hope and a future."²

Mary was chosen to carry Jesus into the world. The angel told her, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." In the same way, we are called to carry Jesus into our world, to be His hands and feet, and to share His love with others.

But Mary like us had a choice. The angel did not force God's plan upon her. She could have rejected it. But she chose to say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." This shows us that God invites us into His story and gives us the freedom to respond.

Did you ever consider why Mary said yes? Or what if she had said no? Mary was a wise and smart young woman. She knew her Hebrew scriptures. Her Magnificat or song of salvation which she sings after meeting with her cousin Elizabeth closely resembles another song in scripture. It's the song sung by Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 as she dedicated her son, Samuel, to God in the Hebrew temple. So Mary had countless stories from scripture embedded in her being that gave her confidence and courage to say yes. It will all work out and this will be a tremendous blessing.

People will call you blessed. Not ignorant, or too young, or immature. But blessed.

Notice that Mary's question was simply "how will this be?" It wasn't disbelief, but a simple teenage inquisitiveness. The angel explains very simply how it would unfold. God would take care of the details. All Mary needed to do was trust that God would be true to his Word.

Finally, we hear in these texts that we can know that God is with us. In Isaiah, God assures His people, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." Mary, too, was assured of God's presence. The Holy Spirit would come upon her, empowering her for the task ahead.

² Jeremiah 29:11

This Advent season, we are invited to trust in God's promises. When we face challenges, we can remember that God walks with us. He equips us to fulfill our unique purpose, just as He did for Mary, Jacob, and Israel.

So if there were one nugget of truth that I hope that we would take away from today's sermon, it would be that we would know that we are blessing from the One from whom all blessings flow. The One who sees us, knows us, calls us by name, equips us, and is with us.

But then what are we to do with such knowledge? It can either puff us up or it can call us to action.

What if we wrote notes of blessing this Christmas? Those words can bring healing, life, and purpose.

Sarah Ostrand has invited us to join her in writing Christmas cards to a few residents at the Bon Aventure Assisted Living facility where she serves. Or you can write to an old friend, a family member, or a mentor who made a difference in your life.

What if we gave out blessing bags to our houseless friends that at the Youth Group created for us. These are located in a big blue bucket in the narthex as you first walked into the church. Take one of those, keep it in your car, and then give it to someone as you see them on the street corners.

And finally, what if we spoke words of blessing into other people's lives? In fact, let's practice this now.

Turn to your neighbor and say "Neighbor, you are a blessing, not a burden." Then say to yourself. "I am a blessing, not a burden."

My friends, when we believe that we are a blessing to God, we can then be a blessing to others. When we stop believing that we are a blessing to God, then we may stop being a blessing to others.

As we celebrate Christmas, let us remember the power of our words and actions. We have the opportunity to be blessings to those around us. Just as Ethan's letter reminded me of the impact we can have, each of us can speak words of encouragement, hope, and love to others.

This Advent, let's choose to reflect God's love in our words and deeds. Let's remind one another of our worth, encourage each other in our purposes, and trust in God's presence with us.

May we embrace the truth that we are cherished, called, and equipped to be a blessing to the world. Let us carry the light of Christ into our communities, sharing His hope and love during this special season.

Let's close by saying this breath prayer together.

INHALE: In you, O God, EXHALE: I find my worth.