

Words for the Beginning-Advent 1
You Are a Blessing
Isaiah 43 and Luke 1: 26-37
Rev. Kelley Becker

There is nothing quite like a child's imagination. When my oldest son, Christopher, was young, he was obsessed with capes. Blankets and towels became capes as he pretended to be Superman, Batman, and the Count from Sesame Street. His interest in capes prompted his grandma, who enjoyed sewing, to make him capes in almost every color imaginable. My mom loved sewing for her grandchildren. In addition to capes, she made cute little outfits for Christopher and Andrew and baby quilts that matched their nurseries. She made teddy bears, dolls, and even a fireman's coat one Halloween. When the boys got older and didn't want to wear cute little overalls with animals and cartoon characters on them and they moved on to playing with Legos and hockey sticks, my mom began making quilts for other family members and friends.

She gave most of the quilts she made away, but she kept some. As I went through her belongings, I found the ones she kept. Every quilt has its own story. Every piece of fabric came from somewhere or someone. Pieced together, one section of fabric at a time, quilts tell stories through patterns, or in some cases, a purposeful absence of pattern. Quilts can tell stories about what's happening in the world, faith, family, and the natural world.

Each week on the front of our Advent bulletins, a picture of a quilt square will represent part of the story of this season. I hope this series imparts a feeling just as much as a message, a feeling like a warm quilt wrapped around each of us, giving us the courage to face whatever comes next. I hope the blessings we will read together will be steady ground, a path for our feet to find the next step forward into the unknown of the new year. I hope you are reminded of who you are and specifically today, I want you to hear these words and take them to heart, "You are blessed."

The words we say to each other are powerful. A while ago, I did a children's message in which I emptied a tube of toothpaste onto a plate. I asked the children to help me put the toothpaste back in the tube. We tried to scoop it up with toothpicks but quickly realized the toothpaste was not going back into the tube. Words are a lot like toothpaste, once they come out of our mouths, we can't put them back in. That whole sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me, is a lie. Words do hurt.

But words can also heal. Well-chosen words have the power to inspire and affirm, to comfort and encourage. This series is filled with blessings, with the words we need to hear again and again, no matter how old we are. In a world that uses words to divide and demean, we will choose words for belovedness and hope for that is where we all

begin...beloved. Listen to these words from Isaiah 43 in which the author imagined God saying to the ancient Israelites:

...Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
2 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.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...
4 Because you are precious in my sight
and honored and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6 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—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made." (NRSV)

Frequently in the Hebrew Bible, prophets serve as the keeper of the people's history, combating whatever dominant narratives are coming from whoever the oppressor is at that moment. As we read, "When you pass through the waters...and through the rivers... when you walk through the fire..." What we might hear as a metaphor for tough times, our Jewish faith ancestors would have heard as significant, specific moments of in Hebrew history. With full context added this passage might read: "When you pass through the waters as you did through the Red Sea out of Egypt... and through the dry bed of the River Jordan into the promised land...when you walk through the fire like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego..." In the snarling face of the Babylonian empire that had Israel in a chokehold, this author proclaimed Israel's prosperous destiny and coming salvation from their oppressors, not based on a magical future prediction, but based on God's faithful action in the past.¹

This ancient message is for all of us. Whatever we are experiencing or will experience, we are not born to feel like we aren't enough, or don't matter, or to be defined by our mistakes. Because God created us, we belong to God, we have worth, and we are loved...before we do a single thing. We are claimed by God and God calls us by name.

¹ Craig, Kayla, "Sermon Planning Guide," *Words for the Beginning Advent Series*, Sanctified Art.

This message isn't limited to the Hebrew Bible. It is everywhere in the New Testament. The foundation of Jesus' message was that every human being matters to God. The lost are found by a God who seeks all of us...not because of what we've done, but because of who we are; human beings, created by God, in the image of God. Each one of us is a blessing to a world that cries out to be blessed.

The author of Luke's story of Jesus' birth begins with the language of blessing. This is Luke 1:26-37.

One month later God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee 27 with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. 28 The angel greeted Mary and said, "You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant. 30 Then the angel told Mary, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, 31 and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. 33 He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end." 34 Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not even married!" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. 36 Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. 37 Nothing is impossible for God!" 38 Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." And the angel left her. (CEV)

This is a familiar story to many of us. Sometimes familiarity keeps us from giving something our full attention. But the angel's first words to Mary are too important to this story and too important to our lives to allow them to go in one ear and out the other. Today, the same as 2000 years ago, so many people are told—implicitly and explicitly—that they are a burden instead of a blessing. "You are a blessing" is a message that can easily be muted, trivialized, or redacted. Hustle culture, scarcity thinking, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy are all forces that tell us our lives are not a blessing, and that who we are is not good enough.² Sadly, when we fail to see our own blessedness, it doesn't do harm just to ourselves, it hurts other people. If we can't see ourselves as sacred, then it's hard for us to see others that way.

When we are rooted in our blessedness, though, we long to share that with others. By embracing our inherent blessedness as a starting point, we open our hearts to recognize and affirm the blessedness in others, which changes how we interact with other people and our community. God's love invites us to live out our belovedness by changing our world with love and entering into the work of creating a world in which every human being knows their worth and all of creation is cared for and valued.

The road ahead for Mary was not "blessed" in the sense that everything was easy and went well. We know her story well enough to know that isn't true. Everything about

² Craig, Kayla, "Sermon Planning Guide," Words for the Beginning Advent Series, Sanctified Art.

Jesus' birth was difficult...the timing, the circumstances, the place...everything. But the message the Gospel writer wanted his original audience to understand is that Mary's specialness wasn't because of the family she was born into, the things she had done, or the way she sailed through life with ease. Her specialness was in her very existence. Her specialness was in her relationship to the One who created her. She belonged to God, and therefore, she was blessed. And with that truth planted firmly in her heart, Mary bravely began something new.

In the first-century Mediterranean world, it was a pretty big claim to say that Mary was blessed, especially since Mary was a woman. I think it is very possible that Gabriel's words, "You are truly blessed," would have been the most shocking thing about that angelic encounter. Well, that may be an overstatement. But, in that patriarchal world, women were generally not the carriers of God's blessing and honor. Men were honored and blessed, women were only blessed through men. Mary's story is the beginning of Jesus' story, a story in which everyone is valued, everyone has worth, and hope is alive in a new way. To take the quilt metaphor a step further, imagine that every person born is a sacred part of the divine quilt, a quilt crafted in love, with all the colors and textures you can imagine, all stitched together, all beautiful.

The ancient Israelites, oppressed by the Babylonian Empire, needed to hear the prophet's reminder of who they were and whose they were. Mary needed to hear the angel tell her who she was and who she belonged to. And we, thousands of years later still need to hear it too. We need to hear it again and again.

As we begin Advent together, these words are for you...

You are a blessing.
If you hear nothing else,
if the wind howls,
if your brain runs amok,
if rebuttals and denials line up like little toy soldiers,
then hear this—
you are a blessing.
You are a blessing.
For our creating God
breathed life into your being.
And there is simply no way that,
along with that life,
some of God's goodness
didn't slip right in.
So tell the rebuttals to rest.
Tell the toy soldiers to find another hill,
because this one is reserved for joy and celebration.
You are a blessing.

Breathe it in.

(Original blessing by Rev. Sara Speed, Sanctified Art, edited by Rev. Kelley Becker for the DCC community)

No matter how old you are and what your life has been like, you can begin again. And when you do, begin with the truth, you matter. The world needs you. You are a world changer. You are a blessing. Amen.