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Paul Purdue preaching

“Blessed is she who believed what was spoken by the Lord!” It all begins with women. Have you noticed how the Bible's two cornerstone stories, the Exodus and The Incarnation, begin with women? Exodus begins as Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, refuse to uphold Pharaoh's diabolical plans. Then Moses's mother and his sister, Miriam, hatch an elaborate plan to save Moses, floating baby Moses down the Nile in a little ark right into Pharaoh's palace. “Blessed is she who believed what was spoken by the Lord!”

Luke's Good News begins with Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth is “blameless” in the eyes of the Lord. The angel addresses Mary “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you”. Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III point out these righteous women are blessed because of who they are, not because of some status in a purity culture. (Levine and Witherington's Luke Commentary). The Lord is with Mary and Elizabeth before and after they have children, not because they have children. “Favored one, blameless, the Lord is with you, Blessed are you... blessed is the fruit of your womb... blessed is she who believed!”

Mary's name in Aramaic is Miriam, the same name as Moses' sister who led the celebration as the Hebrew people passed through the Red Sea. King Herod's wife, Queen Myriam, was connected to the last days of Jewish independence before Rome occupied the nation. Ben Witherington and Amy Jill Levine write that “Mary is associated by name with two women who represented self-determination and freedom from oppression.”

Nazareth was so remote, there is no ancient reference to the tiny town outside of Gospels. Mary is from nowhere and anywhere. Today, you can find her likeness in Churches and gardens almost everywhere. Mary was right, generations have called her blessed.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you”, the angel said. We have no description of the angel, but Mary is terrified and perplexed by it. We like these binaries dividing fear and courage, meditation and action, faith and questioning; but often part of the same holy experience. Mary is not too afraid to ask her questions “how can this be?” A faith without questioning, wondering, and exploring may not be faith at all. Mary, scholars tell us is likely 18 to 23 years old, but stands toe to toe with an angel questioning, pondering, or as Jesus directs us “asking, seeking, and knocking”. (Matt 7) On Maundy Thursday, Jesus wrestles with God in the garden of Gethsemane. If you

have questions, it is okay, God made you “ask, seek, and knock” that is the essence of faith. After questioning, Mary answers, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Father Richard Rohr writes “Many humans can identify with Mary more than they can with Jesus precisely because (Mary) was not God, but the archetype for our yes to God! Not one heroic action is attributed to her, only trust itself. Pure being and not doing. From her first yes to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38), to the birth itself (2:7), to her last yes at the foot of the cross (John 19:25), and her full presence at fiery, windy Pentecost (see Acts 1:14, where she is the only woman named at the first outpouring of the Spirit), Mary appears on cue at the key moments of the Gospel narratives. She is Everywoman and Everyman, and that is why I call her the feminine symbol for the universal incarnation. Mary is the Great Yes that humanity forever needs for Christ to be born into the world.” (The Universal Christ)

We do not know why Mary “got up and moved with haste” to the Judean highlands. For years, I preached that Mary likely feared for her life because of the Levitical purity laws. However, Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington tell us there is little evidence these laws were ever carried out. Amy Jill and Ben direct us to John chapter 8, where the religious leaders drag a woman somehow caught in the very act of adultery before Jesus. Apparently she was committing adultery alone. They demand “The law commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” This is a trap question, if Jesus sides with the law, his enemies will name him a sociopath, if Jesus calls for mercy they will name Jesus a heretic. Jesus elegantly escapes the trap calling us all to examine our lives, “you without sin throw the first stone.” Imagine this, for thousands of years the people had blamelessly ignored an unholy law. We should praise God for righteous disobedience. Mary may not have feared for her life, but these purity laws created a culture that shamed, isolated, judged, and oppressed people, especially women. Mary leaves home with haste but no mention of her parent’s blessings, any provisions, or traveling companions. She is favored, blameless, and running away.

I imagine when Mary arrived at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth the door was open. Mary comes in calling “Auntie Elizabeth, Uncle Zechariah (who has been silent since seeing an angel), Aunt Elizabeth”. Hearing Mary calling, Elizabeth comes in from their home’s inner courtyard and “hearing Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in Elizabeth’s womb. Filled with the Holy Spirit Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.... as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed the word of the Lord”

Imagine yourself as Mary, you have left whatever home was with haste. The angel initially terrified you. You have questions and doubts. You are pregnant but not married. You can't talk to Joseph who is likely brokenhearted and plans to quietly send you away. (Matthew 1). But you come into Zechariah's house and this godly wonderful older aunt embraces you with God's boundless love. "Blessed are you... blessed is this moment ... leap for joy... blessed is she who believed" Hearing the divine embrace on someone else's lips can change everything. Our Jewish friends could teach us a lot about the power of blessings- the rabbis prescribe 100 blessings a day. Blessing can change the trajectory of someone's life. Being a blessing can change us forever..

I hope you know the power of someone looking into your eyes and saying ; "you are beloved, you are favored, the Lord is with you, blessed are you, blessing is this journey (your questions and fears), blessed is she, blessed is he, blessed are they who come to the LORD." I hope someone has leapt for joy to see you. One of our children's high school friends had spent the summer with her dad, and when Connie and I pulled into the driveway, she literally jumped up and down for joy and ran to embrace Connie almost in tears. Oh to be a safe place, a sanctuary for someone, what could be more holy?

Why are we so quick to judge or curse but slow to offer a blessing? Why withhold blessings, reign in praise, make them earn our respect or win our approval? Are we like the patriarch Isaac, who believed he only had one blessing to give? Do we believe that the love of God is boundless and infinitely renewable? The Apostle Paul wrote "I pray that you might know, with all the saints, the breadth, the length, the height and the depth of the love of Christ, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God". (Ephesians 3) Friends, your blessings may release something holy in someone else, lifting them up and allowing their spirits to rejoice in God and their souls to magnify the Lord. If you want to change the world, be a blessing.

Elizabeth's blessing speaks boldness and power into Mary. Blessed are you... blessed is this risky mission.... blessed is she who believed the word of the Lord" And hearing God's deep embrace through Elizabeth's acceptance, Mary finds her voice and prophecies

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
With all my heart, I glorify God!
In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God
God has looked with favor on me.
Imagine future generations calling me blessed;

the Mighty One has done great things for me
 Holy is the Lord.
 God's mercy comes to those with reverence.
 God scatters proud thinkers.
 God brings down powerful thrones,
 God lifts up the lowly,
 God fills the hungry with good things,
 But sends those already rich away empty handed.
 God is merciful loving equity
 God keep God's promises,

AT Belmont, we love this justice language. We love Mary's roar. We hear Mary singing about God's equity and justice on earth, right now, not one day in heaven. Rev Kate Fields had this sticker on her water bottle of Mary squared up like a prize fighter: bold, prophetic, the mother of future Table Flipper, a woman declaring her greatness like Munhamind Ali "All generations will call me blessed." Mary rules like her namesake Miriam, who sang as the most powerful nation on earth ground to a halt in the Red Sea. Mary is all of that fight and more. But if we understand Mary or anyone as a one dimensional sticker we will dehumanize them. Mary is a liberator, a prophetic voice, and Jesus' first teacher, because Mary has a deep spiritual life. Mary's Magnificat sings of justice and introspection, of liberation and the inner life. Faith without doing justice is an illusion. Justice without faith often burns out our souls.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
 my spirit rejoices in God,
 God lifts up the lowly
 God keeps God's promises

Let us be like Mary, asking, seeking, serving. Let us be like Elizabeth, seeing God in others and speaking blessings into their lives. Let us be like Mary, who magnifies the Lord and finds confidence to believe she can be a blessing to all generations. So keep your eyes open and hear this blessing

Greetings favored one.
 The Lord is with you.
 Blessed are you.
 Blessed is the journey you are on.
 Blessed is she, he, they who believe
 Let your soul magnify the Lord
 Let your spirit rejoice in God

Allow God's kindom to come through you
Change the world.
Be a blessing
So that earth and heaven might align, Amen