

Every Life and Breath is Blessed (Advent 3)

Luke 1:46-55

December 13, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

In the “Hey, Mary” song that we played a couple of weeks ago, there’s a line in the chorus that says this: “Every life and breath is blessed. You never know when God might appear.” Every life and breath is blessed. Undoubtedly true.

And also hard to say this, in a year when so many lives have been lost or forever changed, when so many breaths have been constrained and labored. Every life and breath is blessed. I don’t think I’ve ever preached such a somber set of Advent sermons as I have this year. And yet this Advent seems to call for somber. It seems to take extra effort to find joy and capture the happiness that came more easily to some of us in previous years.

Mary lived in no less a somber time. Before modern medicine. Before technological advances. Without any governmental safeguards against hunger and poverty. Even though we’re coming to learn of the limits of each of those things, they do offer us some protection. Mary lived in a somber time, when an Empire ruled her land, when most of her friends and neighbors lived a subsistence life in a precarious economy, when life expectancy was barely what we might call “middle aged.”

Mary sings these words after Gabriel has made the big announcement of Jesus’s upcoming arrival and Mary’s motherhood. She sings that all generations will call her blessed. And why? Well, immediately it is because God has looked with favor on her. But the only reason that matters is because of who God is. She spends the rest of her song praising God, the Mighty One. The Mighty One has not upheld the humans who are mighty; in fact, God has lifted up the lowly, has filled up the hungry, has kept promises made to Israel. God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, and sent the rich away empty. That is why God is great, that is why it matters that God has chosen Mary, and that’s why people will call her blessed. It’s because of God, and God being on the side of the oppressed and trampled down.

Mary’s life is not blessed because of who she is, but because of who God is. Mary’s life is not blessed with material things, but with spiritual gifts. Even so, her song makes clear that God sides with those who are not in power and not rich at the expense of others. It doesn’t take too much time scrolling through the news, nor listening to the tv, to hear about proud and powerful folks and rich folks who

are getting richer. It's far too common to hear about miles-long lines of hungry people at food banks. And Mary's song, which echoes Hannah's song in the book of First Samuel as well as many of the prophets, proclaims that God lifts up those who are hungry and lowly, like her, and brings down the proud and powerful and rich.

One thing that was strange to us when we first moved to La Grange was the garbage situation in our neighborhood. We live in what looks like a very suburban neighborhood, much like the one I grew up in, in Arlington. But there are some significant differences. The goat pasture across the road from our house is one we noticed right away. Our neighborhood is not in the city limits, which means we do not get city services like city water or trash pickup. The water situation is addressed by a water district, but the lack of a garbage truck, trundling down the street on a scheduled day of the week, has taken some adjustments.

What we do instead of rolling the trash bin out to street is we purchase giant blue trash bags from the county trash collection site. They're almost as tall as I am, and each blue bag costs \$2. When one is filled, we take it down the hill to the county trash collection site. There at what is essentially the dump, I have encountered the nicest people in the county. They answered all my questions about recycling and how this whole process worked. When people arrive, they unload all the trash and recycling from the cars; in fact, they seem to prefer that I not help them. They do so with a smile on their face, which yes, I can tell even though they're wearing masks now. It's not a particularly pleasant place, as you might imagine, especially in hot weather. The smell of rotting garbage and sour milk from the plastic recycling dumpster. But every person that works there is unfailingly nice.

A garbage sorter/collector seems pretty lowly to me. Each of these guys does have a job and compared to a lot of people, are lucky in that way. Their lives are blessed, Mary reminds us. They are blessed because it is the Mighty One who lifts them up.

Some days, we may not feel lifted up. We may not feel blessed. Our every breath certainly feels more stressed out, or a huge deep sigh at the state of the world, than it does blessed. But every life and breath is blessed. Not because of who we are. Not in the least. But because of who God is. And we know who God is. Mary has told us. Hannah told us. The prophets told us. And most especially Jesus didn't just tell us but showed us. God is the one who lifts up those who the world puts down. And to the extent that we are the ones put down by the world—and that applies to some of us more than others, depending on our skin

color, our age, our gender, and our income—to the extent that we are the ones put down by the world, then the God who blesses is the God who lifts up the lowly.

Every life and breath is blessed, the “Hey Mary” song tells us. And every life and breath is blessed because you never know when God might appear. And Mary herself shows us what the garbage collectors have shown me, that God is likely to show up in the lowliest of places.