

Blessed are You

*A sermon preached on Luke 1:39-55 on Sunday, December 22, 2024,
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I.*

Pastor Tom Long tells a story from his childhood about a game he and his neighborhood buddies would play to pass the time on rainy afternoons when they couldn't be out on their bikes. He doesn't remember there being rules to the game, or even a name of the game, but if it had had one, it would be called "Where Would You Leave the Treasure?" The premise was simple: let's say you had a large amount of money – a treasure, if you will – but an unexpected crisis has come up, and you have to leave that treasure with someone else for safekeeping. There's not time to rush it to the bank or bury it under the maple tree in the backyard. You have to find another person with whom you can entrust it. So who would you choose?

As Dr. Long recalled, "the fun of the game, of course, was sitting around in a circle and exploring all the character flaws and virtues of the various possibilities, searching for a trustworthy person."

"How about the school principal?," someone would suggest.

"Nah, I bet he'd steal it."

"What about the preacher?"

"Too risky. He'd probably just put it in the collection plate."

"Okay then, what about your sister?"

"Are you kidding? She'd want to keep it!"

And on and on it would go, this quest for a fragile human to risk your entire treasure upon.¹

¹ Tom Long, *Something Is About to Happen: Sermons for Advent and Christmas*, "Where's the Treasure?," p33. This sermon deeply inspired me this year, and today's sermon reflects its influence.

II.

Which is precisely how you might read the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This was treasure, but not of silver or gold. Not of bitcoin or power. Not of market gains or end of the year bonuses. Rather, the treasure, the blessing if you will, is simply and profoundly this: good news. Good news that God is not done. That God makes all things new. That God has come near and will never leave us. That God is working tirelessly, always to set things right – swords to plowshares, lions with lambs, grace sufficient for all things.

But where to leave such a gift that will be protected but accessible, hoped for but ignored, praised but crucified?

Remember the origin story of John the Baptist from a couple of weeks ago, that the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness – and did so in the political environment of Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate and all the other cast of characters? Before John came to be, Luke says, were “the days of King Herod of Judea.” Perhaps the treasure could go there; the blessing is political, right? Perhaps the names we recognize – the Herods of the world, leaders in our political and business spheres – would be best equipped for blessing, able to do the most for this good news with their power gained and held.

But “in the days of King Herod of Judea,” Luke continues, “there was a priest named Zechariah,” husband of Elizabeth, future father of John called the Baptist. Perhaps a treasure could be nestled with the priest; the blessing is theological, right? Zechariah and Elizabeth couldn’t conceive, and as Luke says, “both were getting on in years.” When the angel of the Lord comes to Zechariah to tell him that God has heard their prayers and Elizabeth would bear a son,” Zechariah couldn’t believe it. He didn’t believe it, and told the

angel as much, who then rendered Zechariah mute for his lack of belief until baby John was born.

So where could that blessing go? Where could the treasure live? Not with the Herods – they’d abuse it. Not with the Zechariahs – they’d question it. Not in the halls of power or the coffers of wealth. Not in the obvious places, with the obvious people, using the obvious means. Rather, the miracle of the blessing is that it came through the unlikeliest of sources – through the womb of a young woman.

“Greetings, favored one,” the angel messenger had said to Mary. “The Lord is with you. Don’t be afraid, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great,” the angel declares, “and of his kingdom, there will be no end. For nothing will be impossible with God.” The announcement of the treasure comes to a woman, not a man; to the powerless, not the powerful, words for the beginning of God’s new day. “But how can this be?” Mary wonders, and oh to be a fly on that wall to see her astounded face, and hear her astonished voice. To marvel as her words ring out anticipating the swing of time: “here am I,” Mary asserts her role and accepts her call, “the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

But the blessing doesn’t end there. For treasures are best shared, aren’t they? Luke tells us that Mary travels to see her friend Elizabeth – like a cousin to her – and upon her arrival, baby John leaps in her womb, making clear the work of God in the coming Christ. “Blessed are you among women,” Elizabeth claps with delight, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” The companionship the two find with one another rings out through the ages: two women, overlooked and lowly, one too old and one too young, have been

unexpectedly blessed with new life stirring within them. For in the community of women, between two of the unlikeliest carriers of the divine spark, blessing enveloped them, and the treasure lived within Mary.

Thus, she couldn't help but to sing. "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary begins, unfurling what church tradition will call "the Magnificat." Mary praises God for favor, but mostly she announces what God *will* do by telling what God *has* done. "God has shown strength, and scattered the proud, and brought down the powerful, and lifted the lowly, and filled the hungry, and sent the rich home empty." "It was all happening inside of Mary, and she was so sure of it," Barbara Brown Taylor says of Mary's song, "that she was singing about it ahead of time – not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true. Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it – not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone – maybe even God."²

It's a reversal, Mary declares, coming to this world. God's new day that her son will soon call "the kingdom of God." A world where blessing comes first to the poor, the mourning, the meek, the peacemakers. Where the treasure lives and moves and has his being right here among us. A treasure so threatening to the Herods and Zechariahs and so subversive in the face of the status quo that these words have been banned off and on over time. A treasure so liberating to all the world that it must be nestled first in the hearts of the last and least, for there it can be cherished fully.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p17-18.

Luke is famous for putting long speeches in the mouths of the gospel characters in Luke and Acts, but this is the only one voiced by a woman, the first place the gospel is proclaimed. “Forgettable,” history might say. “Unremarkable,” tyrants might scoff. “Innocuous,” billionaires might laugh. “Foolish,” claim the perishing, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”³

III.

A quick examiner of history might use “forgettable” or “unremarkable” about the life of someone whose story they didn’t know. But you’d be the foolish one to do so about Septima Poinsette Clark. Born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina to a formerly enslaved man and a laundress, young Septima had a fierce mother, Victoria, who wanted more for her children than to become domestics and set Septima on the path to be a teacher.

The reality in Charleston in the early 1900s, though, was that no Black folks were allowed to be teachers at all. The disparities in education were profound, as evidenced by just this one point of many: Charleston spent, on average, \$48.59 per year educating a white student and only \$.95 educating a Black student. And the governor of South Carolina was unambiguous: “when the people of this country began to try to educate the Negro, they made a serious and grave mistake, and I fear the worst result is yet to come. So why continue?”

Into that environment and outside the city limits, Septima Clark took her 100-person classroom of Black children, on backless benches, with chalkboards but no chalk and a handful of outdated books, and began to

³ 1 Corinthians 1:18

teach. She taught them how to read. How to learn. Along the way, she began volunteering with the NAACP, and experienced what a significant tragedy adult illiteracy was for so many. With her young students in mind, she created a new curriculum that met her older students where they were. And among so many other steps Septima took, one was using that curriculum to create a Citizenship School, teaching the adults in her community how to read **and** access the polls. “I’m not going to be the teacher,” Septima said to the school’s students. “We’re going to learn together.” Against all sorts of roadblocks – space, violence, suspicion – the Citizenship Schools found their footing. They grew and spread, 37 schools around the Sea Islands neighboring Charleston. Graduates passed their voting literacy tests and successfully registered to vote. In their community, Black voter registration went up 300%. And as the Citizenship School model spread around the Southeast, tens of thousands more lives were changed.

When Septima felt wearied by the weight of her work, “faith I must have and will keep to lean heavily on,” she said of her relationship with God. In a dearth of darkness, she found light. In the absence of learning, she fostered it. When investment was withheld from her people, she birthed life-changing treasure. Blessing. Hope.

Did you pick up on Septima’s middle name? It was given to her by her family’s enslaver, Joel Poinsett, US ambassador to Mexico by day and amateur botanist by night. On one of his trips to Mexico, he spotted a large red plant blooming at Christmas and loved it, bringing it home. What was

known to Mexicans as the Flowers of the Holy Night became known to Americans as the poinsettia.⁴

Where did the treasure live? Not with the Herods or Zechariahs. Not in the halls of power or the coffers of wealth. Not in the obvious places, with the obvious people, using the obvious means. Rather, the blessing to all touched by Septima Poinsette Clark came from her small and mighty life, inspired, perhaps, by Mary, whose God has shown strength, and scattered the proud, and brought down the powerful, and lifted the lowly, and filled the hungry, and sent the rich home empty; Mary, whose flower of the Holy Night became the savior of the world.

IV.

Where's the treasure?, you wonder. Where's the blessing?

That question might be painful for you this year. Where's the blessing when you're unemployed or underemployed, when a trip to the grocery causes a clench in your stomach, unsure if you have enough in your account to pay it? Where's the blessing when the one thing you wanted most in the world, the one thing worth everything is unavailable to you? Where's the blessing, when the horizon of your life just feels like a succession of clouds and fog, shadowing mystery and opaque to the hope for what's ahead? Where's the blessing, when tyrants rise, and governments fall, and billionaires reap profits off the inequities they create, and all seems increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous? *Blessed are you?*, you hear echoing from Mary's story. No no: blessed are *they*. Blessed are *y'all*. Blessed is anyone else but me.

⁴ This beautiful story of Septima Clark came from Sharon McMahon's *The Small and the Mighty: Twelve Unsung Americans Who Changed the Course of History, from the Founding to the Civil Rights Movement*.

Yet perhaps this year, we can take heart in the good news. Good news that God is not done. That God makes all things new. That God has come near. That God will never leave us.

But not just that: we can take heart that this good news was, and is, and will become a treasure for all the world nestled into the small and mighty lives of those we might least expect. We only have to look for it! The treasure of good news that grew in Mary, and was cherished by Elizabeth, and animated lives like Septima Clark, and changed the world? That treasure can nestle into you too! That good news can be born in you too! That blessing is for you too! Despite the odds. In defiance of the accepted order. Beyond the barriers.

How can this be?, we ask. And echoing through time and space, we hear good news resound: “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

V.

I can hardly consider Mary’s story without thinking of the words from medieval mystic Meister Eckhart: “we are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us.”⁵

Where is the treasure? Where is the blessing? Begotten in you and me once again. Amen!

⁵ Meister Eckhart, as quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in “Mothers of God,” *Gospel Medicine*, p153.