

The Mystery and Power of Blessing

Our scripture today picks up right in the middle of the fast-paced first chapter of Luke's Gospel, as we follow along with the stories that will lead us this week right up to the birth of the child in the manger, right up to Christmas. These are stories, and this is a path, which for countless many is well worn, and much beloved, like a well-seasoned cast-iron skillet that's been passed down from generation to generation, or like a favorite hiking trail that you return to year after year. And so we return to these stories, and in some sense the stories themselves remain the same—the skillet has the same satisfying heft in the hand, the trail makes the same twists and turns through the woods—and yet even as they remain the same, we return to them because they have this strange, perhaps we can say sacred power to elicit new experiences of surprise and wonder within us, like discovering that the old skillet works perfectly for this new recipe you found, or returning to the trail and noticing how in a certain sense it's always a different trail each season and each day even, much like the saying about a river being different each time you step in it.

And so each year leading up to Christmas, we remember how Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, who came with the startling news that this young, unwed, unknown woman from a small, unknown town was to be the one to give birth to the child of God—a child who, among other things, would change the world by revealing the boundless depth and breadth of God's love and compassion. We remember how Mary was completely caught off-guard and bewildered by this news, just as I'm sure such news would catch us off-guard and leave us bewildered. And each year we also remember how Mary needed some help figuring out just what this news meant, and so each year she returns to her own well-worn trail, as she "hurries along," on an 80 mile trek from her hometown of Nazareth in Galilee towards an unnamed, small Judean hill town, seeking the

wise council of her much older cousin Elizabeth, herself dealing with her own sense of excited bewilderment given her own unexpected pregnancy—hers just as unexpected on account of her old age as Mary’s was on account of her youth.

And so these two unlikely, unexpected women finally meet in the story that we heard today, in an encounter that’s traditionally called “The Visitation,” but which, given what happens, might as well be called something a little more colorful like “The Great Duet of Blessings and Wonders,” as once these two meet strange things start happening, and they can’t help but start singing for joy.

Strange things start happening, like Elizabeth’s baby leaping for joy in her womb before Mary even tells her the news. This reminds me, and you may have heard about how in the weird world of quantum physics, there’s a truly bizarre phenomenon that has been proven in experiments, but which nevertheless still perplexes scientists, which is called “quantum entanglement.” What this describes is a strange thing that happens when sub-atomic particles which were once closely connected and bundled together are pulled apart and separated, and placed at a distance, even at a great distance of thousands of miles, one here in Weybridge, Vermont, for example, and the other in Weybridge, England. Once you separate these particles, it turns out that when when you change one of those particles in a certain way, say you start spinning the particle at a certain speed here in Vermont, basically instantly, faster even than the speed of light, the other particle in England starts spinning at the exact same speed. Somehow what happens to one thing instantly effects the other, which means things in the physical world can be connected in a profound way that even Einstein was amazed by and couldn’t account for—quantum entanglement, maybe a good metaphor for understanding this mysterious bond across the miles and across the generations between Mary and Elizabeth.

Thinking about their story of blessing, I can’t help but think, that for us here today, traveling our own well-worn trail to Christmas, that we’re very fortunate to have this scripture of blessing read alongside,

or entangled with the great blessing of celebrating a baptism here this morning, adding our blessing to the blessing that is Noah Morgan. It makes me wonder if, just like how we don't really understand how something like quantum entanglement works, I wonder if we also don't really understand how something like the power of blessing works. The type of blessing Elizabeth gave Mary right when Mary opened the door. The type of blessing the waters of baptism gave to Noah today, and through Noah the type of blessing that was given to us and to his family. The type of blessing that we often confer upon one another here in our worship—sometimes extending our hands in the ancient posture of blessing; sometimes laying our hands on the shoulders of someone who is moving away or otherwise marking life's sacred moments of transition and change, as, I know that we'll never forget, how you all took over the Benediction on the Sunday before Elizabeth and I were married just over a month ago, and blessed us so beautifully as we set off into this new chapter of our lives together.

I'm guessing you'll recognize what I mean by the power of blessing here, even as I don't think I could say exactly how it happens, or why, or what it means, but with blessing I do think that something significant happens, and it feels to me at least as if some charge, some power, some surge of the spirit courses through us and transfers beyond us, making the world slightly better and more beautiful in some way.

The writer Marilynne Robinson, who is a proud member of a UCC church like ours in Iowa, has written quite beautifully about the power of blessing in her novel *Gilead*, which is written from the perspective of an old and dying Congregationalist minister named John Ames who sets out to write down an account of his life to leave behind to his young son. In one passage, Rev. Ames recounts how the idea of being able to bless others on a regular basis, through baptism and other means, was a large part of what initially drew him to the ministry. Not that pastors are the only ones who can bless, he notes, blessing others is one of the most special powers or maybe

even superpowers that we all have, but for a pastor it's actually written in as part of the job description, as it were.

He tells about his early experience with blessing, when as a child he and his siblings set about the task of trying to baptize, of all things, a litter of unruly farm kittens.

"We were very pious children from pious households in a fairly pious town, and this affected our behavior considerably," says Rev. Ames. "Once, we baptized a litter of cats. They were dusty little barn cats just steady on their legs...It occurred to one of the girls to swaddle them up in a doll's dress—there was only one dress, which was just as well since the cats could hardly tolerate a moment in it and would have been unswaddled as soon as they were christened in any case. I myself moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula.

Their grim old crooked-tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek and began carrying her babies off by the napes of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a good deal. So finally I asked my father in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to say, baptize it. He replied that the Sacraments must always be treated with respect. That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the Sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. I got his meaning, though, and I did no more baptizing until I was ordained...

"I still remember," he concludes "how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind...There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time." (Gilead, 21-23)

"The pure intention of blessing." Of course, that's how Elizabeth greets Mary this morning in our scripture, and it prompts Mary to

sing her song which has echoed throughout the ages. And maybe just as mysteriously as something like quantum entanglement, maybe such a blessing can still pass through the generations, faster even than the speed of light, and the blessing that was then can be a blessing for us now, and what Mary sang about we can sing about, and the whole world can move one step closer to Christmas.