Trained for Resistance
Rev. Cindy Maddox
December 1, 2024

Luke 1:26-38

I grew up visiting my family's summer cabin in Canada for a week most summers.
In the early years the only heat came from a pot belly stove in the main area.
Calling the area a kitchen, dining room, and living room combined
would have been generous to all three categories.
Anyway, the only heat source was in that area,
and since my parents and grandparents were all early risers,
they closed the door to the bedroom we shared
to give my sister and I a little quiet in the wee hours.
That, of course, meant shutting off our access to heat.
We always slept under quilts, but on particularly cold mornings,
one of our parents would come in and put an extra quilt on top of us.
The weight of that extra quilt always felt like love.

As a child I never thought to ask where all those quilts came from.
My grandmother didn't quilt. The crocheted afghans were her handiwork.
I only realized as an adult that all of those quilts were gifts–
made with love by the women in the churches my grandfather pastored.
Two of them–twin size, one for my grandmother and one for my grandfather–
even bore in the middle of the squares
the names of the women who made them
stitched in lovely cursive writing, helping to make the design.
I slept under the love of generations of church women.

I was reminded of this when Pastor Lauren and I chose our Advent theme
because the writing and the images are focused on the pattern of a quilt.
You can see the pattern here on our worship table and will see it in
our devotional book and logos we use throughout the season.
The creators of the series write,

"The Advent journey unfolds like a well-worn quilt,
each patchwork piece lovingly threaded across time and space.
In each thread, we find blessed assurance that with every sacred stitch,
God has been moving toward us all along.
This season reminds us that, what some may see as discarded scraps,
the Maker of heaven and earth calls beautiful and blessed."
Along with this homespun imagery are simple phrases we're choosing to highlight.
Week one is "You are a blessing."

And so we begin with Mary.

"Imagine an angel showing up at someone's home or workplace
entirely unexpectedly and making a life-altering announcement.
Luke tells two such stories in a short span and juxtaposes them."[1]
First we had the angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah, the old priest in the temple,
telling him his equally old wife will bear a child.
Now Gabriel has made the trip north to Nazareth to give equally shocking news
to a young, unmarried maiden.
Mary is described as *greatly troubled* "by the unanticipated visitor . . .
and had every reason to be utterly troubled by a stranger showing up at her door
and making a grand but vague announcement.
As scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes, she was among the most powerless:
young in a setting that valued age, [plus] female, and poor.
The stakes were indeed very high for Mary.
One wrong move could ruin her personal and family reputation
and jeopardize her entire life."[2]

"Mary, an ordinary girl from the obscure corners of Nazareth,
was not cloaked in power or prestige—but was blanketed in belovedness.
And that was enough.

[1] Nadella, Raj.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-luke-126-38-6
[2] Nadella.

Advent invites us to reflect on how we, like Mary,
are invited into God's redemptive narrative—
no matter how ordinary or small we might feel—
for each of us has the potential to carry God's love into a weary world.
Gabriel illustrates how God selects someone the world might overlook
to be part of something beautiful.
Gabriel's message, "Greetings, favored one! God is with you,"
isn't merely a formality but a declaration
of Mary's essential place in this divine quilt."[3]
Blanketed in belovedness.

I wonder if you know that you are, too.
I wonder if you know that you are favored and blessed.
I wonder if you know that you are blanketed in belovedness.
I wonder if you know that you have an essential place in this divine quilt.
I sometimes think half of my pastoral care work and a fourth of my preaching
is trying to convince you that all those people–
all those who hurt you, all those who belittled you,
all those who taught you a violent, vengeful god,
were full of nothing but hot air and hate.
Or maybe they weren't full at all,
but instead were empty, having never experienced God's grace themselves.

The artist who created our cover art for this morning wrote about the process.
"At an early age, I learned that because I am human, I am sinful,
and by my very existence, I am unsuitable to be in God's presence.
Without Jesus to intercede on my behalf,
my unworthiness was untenable to God.
Needless to say, this was not good for my self-esteem or self-image,
and though I have done a lot of work to untangle these lessons
from my expanding theology,

[3] Craig, Kayla. *Words for the Beginning* by Sanctified Art.

there is a lot of lingering self-doubt—bordering on self-hatred—
that I have yet to root out.
God chooses Mary, a young, unmarried woman—
with little value as far as society is concerned—
to be the conduit through which Love takes on flesh."[4]
As she explored the flesh-i-ness, the embodiment of God and love,
the willingness of Mary to give her body to God's mission,
the artist said she found the notion "incompatible with my internalized shame.
It challenged my deep-seated feelings of unworthiness
and threatened to overturn the construct of a God who is repelled by
anything human. . . .
As I attempted to create imagery, I found myself in tears.
What if my fully embodied self, including the most human parts of me,
are not only acceptable but beloved by the creator of the universe?
What if because of my me-ness, God couldn't stay away,
and chose to come near and take on flesh too?
As I drew, I felt a few steps closer to accepting the steadfast, limitless,
unconditional love of God that I claim to believe in,
but have yet to fully receive.
What resulted was an image of Mary and Gabriel in a warm, intimate embrace.
Mary has a peace to her that is like a wave of relief over her whole being.
A kaleidoscope quilt pattern surrounds them and patterns Mary's clothes.
If we could open ourselves up to receive the incomprehensible love of God,
maybe we would constantly feel wrapped up
in a soft, cozy, lovingly-stitched-together quilt.
Favored one, God delights in you—every single bit of you.
Never forget: you are a blessing."[5]

Now, I'm going to take a hard left turn but I promise I'll bring it back around.
I am currently reading a book called *The First Advent in Palestine:*
Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope.

[4] Lauren Wright Pittman. "Artist Statements." *Words for the Beginning* by Sanctified Art.
[5] Ibid.

The author points out that "Jewish tradition held that the promised Messiah
would come from David's house, though most people looked to
the southern town of Bethlehem and to Judea for any signs of hope arising"[6]
rather than to Galilee in the north.
"Even though both Galilee and Judea were among the regions associated
with the twelve tribes of Israel, they did not necessarily get along.
Judean life to the south centered on the temple and Torah,
on Davidic history and hopes.
This was not the case with the villages of Galilee.
The northern towns hailed from several different tribes and had mixed with
other people groups over the course of successive generations of conflict.
They were considered lesser Jews because most weren't circumcised
and didn't worship regularly in the temple,
and because many had intermarried with non-Jewish people.
Galileans, according to the Judeans, were simply not the best of people. . . .
The northern region was [also] known for resistance,
and Galilee stood ever ready to push back against invading forces,
foreign or domestic,
and that included the temple-state located in Jerusalem
that exacted taxes and tithes from the northern provinces. . . .
Something was always happening in Galilee–altercations, protests, uprisings. . . .
A toxic mingling of woe, want, and waiting for the next act of aggression
created cycles of inescapable trauma for all the inhabitants of Galilee.
It was the last place anyone expected to be on God's map for a peace campaign. . .

This girl, Mary, was on no one's list of important people.
Growing up in a restive region, she had been formed by resistance.
Like most around her, she understood justice as rebellion against empires
and their violence."[7]
It is no wonder that when she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, she sang:

[6] Nikondeha, Kelley. *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, p 48.
[7] Nikondeha, Kelley, pp 45-46.

“My soul magnifies God, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has looked with favor on the lowly state of God’s servant.
God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

Mary was a young girl raised in a world of conflict,
formed by a culture of resistance.
“She understood justice as rebellion against empires and their violence.”
So of course she said “yes.”
Of course she agreed to God’s audacious plan.
Where else would the mother of the Messiah come from, than Galilee?

We, too, are facing an empire,
a society where might too often wins and violence rules the day.
Gabriel’s message for Mary is God’s message for us:
Greetings, favored one. God is with you.
Blessed are you.
You have found favor with God.
Now . . . use that favor, use that blessing, to empower change.
God's perfect love invites us to live out our belovedness
by transforming our world with love
and entering into the good work God’s hand began stitching many years ago.
This Advent, may we consider our sacred place within the divine quilt
so that more people will find the warmth of belovedness.