

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent¹
Text: Luke 1:47-55 and Matthew 11:2-11

One of the more difficult lines in Scripture comes in today's gospel reading. John has been imprisoned, and he wants to know, once and for all, if Jesus really is the Messiah. His whole life—his entire ministry—has been about “preparing the way” for the Lord. He's been pointing beyond himself to the one greater than he—the one whose shoes he wasn't even fit to tie. But now John is sitting in prison, and he needs to know. “Are you the one, Jesus? Or should we wait for another?”

Notice that Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. That is so typical of Jesus! Someone told me last week that they just read a book called “The Questions of Jesus” which among other things points out that 80% of the time when Jesus is asked a question, he responds with a question. That, of course, is a good rabbinical tool. This question falls into the 20% group—Jesus does answer, but only sort of. John's question requires a simple “yes” or “no.” But what Jesus says is this: “Go and tell John what you see and what you hear...” Not a question exactly, but it puts the ball back in John's court. Will he—will others have eyes to see and ears to hear how people are being restored to health? Will they see signs of new life? Will they hear the ways that “good news” is being offered to the poor?

And so that's when Jesus says it—the line that always gets me: “blessed is anyone who doesn't take offense at me.” Only in Greek it's even stronger than that. The Greek gives us the root for our English word, “scandal”—a word we tend to reserve for famous people who get caught doing things they aren't supposed to be doing. Literally what Jesus says to John, by way of his disciples, is “Blessed are those who aren't *scandalized* by me.”

Now I ask you—on this third Sunday of Advent: why do you think people are scandalized by health, new life, and good news?

I want to suggest that it is at least in part because we can so easily get “locked in” to a certain set of expectations, a certain ideology, a certain worldview that keeps us from seeing health, new life, and good news in those places that don't fit in with our preconceptions. I want to suggest that everyone is for health, new life, and good news in much the same way that we are all for “motherhood” and “apple pie.” As long as they remain floating in the abstract they sound great. But when they touch our messy lives, they require change, and change is hard. Sometimes it's harder to be well than it is to stay sick. Sometimes dying is easier than living. Sometimes the “same-old-same-old-we've-always-done-it-that-way” news is easier than good news.

What's hard is change—even positive change that leads to growth. One person in an alcoholic family begins to get well—and it doesn't really matter whether it's a kid going to Alateen, a spouse going to Alanon, or the alcoholic going to A.A. Do you know what happens, almost always, at least initially? Even though the healing can now begin, it throws everyone else—at least initially—into chaos. They can't play the same old roles. They have to learn new parts. And that can be very scary. So Jesus says, I think: where you see “health, new life, and good news”—you see the Messiah. But do you dare to see and hear? Blessed are those not too scandalized to notice.

Most of the time, health, new life, and good news first rock our worlds—shaking us to the very foundations of our faith—shattering our world-views. And that scares us to death—because we thought we had it all figured out. And scared people—reacting from the place of fear rather than trust—avert their eyes and cover their ears and sometimes like the prophet Jonah run in exactly the opposite direction. No way! I don't see anything good going on there. How could anything good come out of Nazareth anyway? We begin to see what we want to see, and filter out what we are not yet willing or able to take in. “Blessed, then, are all who aren't scandalized by Jesus...who upsets all of our categories, and rocks all of our tidy worlds.”

Unfortunately, we know even in Advent how the story ends, and even as we move toward Bethlehem we cannot forget that “hill far away” on which stood “an old rugged cross.” Some were indeed scandalized. Jesus scared a lot of people. Especially among the religious establishment. And scared people sometimes are out for blood.

Today on this third Sunday of Advent—as we light the rose-colored candle on our wreath we also have another text to consider, and that is “Mary's Song.” Usually we refer to it by its Latin name—*Magnificat*—which refers to the opening words of the Latin translation: Mary sings: “My soul magnifies the Lord...” We reflect, as we think about the scandal of the Son's ministry, on the scandal of the mother's pregnancy—which no doubt caused a fair amount of gossip among some of the “desperate housewives” in and around Nazareth.

In the story, as Luke sets it up for us—there are two women—these two cousins, Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth is the older of the two—a woman who has come to believe that she could not have children. Like Sarah and Hannah in the Old Testament she had prayed long and hard for a child but had become resigned to the notion that motherhood would not be a vocation for her. And then she finds out that she is pregnant. It's Zechariah, her husband, who blurts out: “But I'm an old man and my wife is no spring chicken either! Are you kidding me?” And the angel Gabriel says, “enough out of you old man...not another word from you until the kid is born.” For nine months the father-to-be is silent. The child is born, and on the eighth day he is to be circumcised and named—and all the relatives are insisting he be called Zechariah after his dad. But the old man takes a pen, and a piece of paper, still unable to speak, and writes: “His name is John.” And then he is able to speak again, and he sings a song about how his son will be called “prophet of the Most High.” (see Luke 1) Last week Darrell suggested that John the Baptist was something of a religious fanatic. Well, you can see how it happened if you read those first chapters of Luke—it was a rather odd beginning, really.

In any case, I'm getting ahead of myself. After Luke tells us that Elizabeth is pregnant, and Zechariah stops speaking, that's when Luke's stage directions have the lights fading say on stage right; and then coming up let's say stage left, on the younger cousin—this teenager for whom the notion of having a child before marriage was inconceivable. (Pun intended.) But this miracle—this *scandal*—also takes place...and with Mary's consent. “Let it be with me according to your Word, O God.” And then she goes off to see her older cousin, Elizabeth, apparently needing to have someone to talk this through with. But maybe also because she had no one else to turn to. Maybe no one else would believe her. Maybe the gossip around Galilee was getting to difficult to bear...everywhere she went, people whispering—*scandalized* by the fact of her pregnancy. And I wonder if when she finally arrived at her cousin's, before anything else, if she didn't

maybe just burst into tears and say: “Elizabeth, I’ve got something to tell you...and blessed are you if you aren’t scandalized by me!”

But Elizabeth feels an “*in utero* John the Baptist” kicking her—and Elizabeth has eyes to see, and ears to hear, and Elizabeth knows something about the strange wonderful mysterious ways that God works in the world. Her mere presence...her refusal to stand in judgment I think—gives Mary the space and the voice to begin to sing: “My soul magnifies the Lord...”

That song is not only the song of an expectant mother: it’s the song of an expectant Jew, a Jew waiting for Messiah to come. For when Messiah comes—or as we Christians might say—when Messiah comes *again*—then the world will be put right. The song is about God’s redeeming work in the world. It’s about how the last will be first, and the first last. It’s about how God scatters the proud and lifts up the lowly and also brings down the arrogant and the powerful a couple of notches. It’s about how the hungry are fed, and how the overfed are put on a diet. The “order of things” in other words, is set right again. It’s about how God makes the rough places plain, and the crooked places straight. That’s how we know God is at work, where things are set right again. But talk about throwing settled worlds into chaos. Talk about change—radical change—social change—personal transformation! Mary sings because she anticipates that her Son will be an agent of that kind of deep, costly change in the world. That he will be the kind of man who is willing to speak truth to power and yet wash the feet of ordinary people. Blessed are those not scandalized by him!

Mary was willing to make a space in her life—literally—for the work of God. No doubt that disrupts her plans and her parents’ plans for her life. Just imagine this teen-age girl trying to explain to her father what has happened, and how she has come to be in a “family way.” We must never take the humanity, and the struggle, and the conflict away from this story. Mary is a strong, courageous young girl who is willing to say yes to God even it means scorn and ridicule from family and neighbors—and most certainly it did mean that. She makes a space within her for God—and that changes not only her life, but the world. Blessed are those not scandalized by that.

St. Augustine once said that each of us is created with a God-shaped hole within us. And that we try to fill that empty space with all kinds of things that are less than God, and therefore don’t fit right. Money, sex, power, alcohol, drugs, food, noise—our fear: all of these are ways humans try to fill that God-shaped hole. But none of them fit. The only way to fill a God-shaped hole in our lives is to fill it with God. And that above all else is what Mary models for us. She makes space in her life for God—and in so doing all things become possible. It isn’t just about her anymore; it’s about the world being health and new life and good news for the world. It’s about being courageous enough to sing: Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me: melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. It’s about saying, in the language Luke gives us: “ok...let it then be with me according to your Word.”

If, like Mary, we dare to fill the God-shaped hole within us with God, then our lives, too, will “magnify the Lord.” Our spirits, too, will rejoice in God our Savior...for we lowly servants too will be raised up, and made healthy, and alive, and we will be instruments of peace—“good news” for all who meet us along the way in life’s journey. Just don’t be too surprised if there is also a little scandal to go along with it.

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