



"Blessed is She"
Scripture – Luke 1:30-55
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, December 19, 2021

A colleague recently posted a photograph of the purple orchid that graces her church office. The picture shows five buds growing along a stem that stretches toward the window — each one perfectly-formed and full of promise. And — at the end of the row — there is a single blossom, just opening itself to the light but already bursting with life.

Her caption read: *Over a year and a half ago, I thought this died and I threw it out. Anna, our church housekeeper and green thumb pulled it out [of the trash] and has been watering it ever since — each week, taking a moment to chat with me and water the pot. Today, it began to bloom again.*

My colleague closed with this reflection: "Lessons learned: 1. New life is possible. And, 2. Nurturing new life takes time, tenderness, hope and patience."

New life is possible, but it takes tending. It takes visionaries like Anna who believe that a pot of dried-out dirt can bring forth something beautiful. It takes caretakers who will water and watch and wait. It takes a heart that will say 'yes' when 'no' is the only obvious answer. Blessed are those like Anna, who believe in the promise of new life; and blessed are we who witness the fruits of their faithfulness.

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Blessed is she who believed ...

These words begin the last blessing that Elizabeth speaks in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. It is a delightful scene — an unusual scene given the tendency of ancient writers to overlook the stories of women. But, here, Luke lifts up a conversation between two expectant mothers, between two *unlikely* mothers.

According to the ways and wisdom of the world, Elizabeth and Mary are both pregnant at the wrong time. One is advanced in age and only now preparing to welcome her first child. Elizabeth has long-borne the burden of barrenness. And, in a society that measured a married woman's worth by the fruitfulness of her womb, she has long-borne the disgrace of being unable to bear children. Mary, on the other hand, is pregnant too soon. She is an unwed teenager — betrothed, yes ... but not married. And, in a society that measured an *unmarried* woman's worth by her purity and virtue, Mary will almost-certainly bear the disgrace that follows an unplanned pregnancy. As soon as she starts showing ... well, she'll be ruined.

But shame is not the substance of the women's conversation. Mary and Elizabeth speak not of disgrace, but of blessing. "Blessed are you among women," Elizabeth exclaims before Mary has said even one word about her pregnancy. Elizabeth already knows that Mary's baby will be Lord of all, for the child in her own womb has leaped for joy and the Holy Spirit has filled her with prophetic speech. And, so, the blessings tumble out: *Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.* Elizabeth's words are powerful and poetic and oh so fitting for this moment. But they are also intriguing. The first two blessings are clearly intended for Mary: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb ...* Surprising words to hear in reference to a woman and child whom the rest of the world will shun as disgraced. But, still, there can be no confusion that Elizabeth speaks them over Mary and Jesus.

But the third blessing is a bit more ambiguous: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord ... Blessed is she who believed ...* I find myself wondering: Who is this *she*? In all likelihood, Elizabeth is speaking of Mary — the one who, only days before, had learned that she would bear the Son of God. Gabriel had given Mary unbelievable news and — instead of balking at the angel — she responded in faith and faithfulness, saying: "Let it be with me according to your word." Elizabeth is likely speaking of the woman standing before her, the one who goes on to sing of the world God is bringing to birth. As Mary prophecies only moments later, this is a world in which the lowly are lifted and the hungry are filled and divine promises are realized. Yes, Elizabeth is likely speaking of Mary when she declares, *Blessed is she who believed ...*

But what if Elizabeth is not *only* speaking of Mary? What if she's offering this blessing for herself, as well? For the mother-to-be who, like Sarah and Rachel and Hannah before her, knows what it is to wait and wait and wait for sorrow to turn to joy. What if she's referencing her own response of faith? For — unlike her husband Zechariah, who balked at Gabriel when the angel came to him — Elizabeth believed that nothing is impossible with God. She trusted that God works to bring about new life in unlikely places, through unlikely people. What if Elizabeth is speaking of herself when she declares, *Blessed is she who believed?* And what if Elizabeth is speaking of others, as well? What if she's offering this blessing for every person who trusts in God's promises — who believes new life can spring up in unpromising places, even in unlikely circumstances: in the wombs of two women who are not supposed to be pregnant; in a pot of dried-up dirt rescued from the rubbish bin; in hearts that ache with the pain of loss; in hospital wards where death lurks in the corners; in neglected neighborhoods where gunshots shatter the stillness of night; in a weary world that is straining under the weight of injustice, and violence, and environmental abuse, and a never-ending pandemic. What if Elizabeth is offering this blessing for every one of us who believes that new life is possible, that new life is worth tending?

Blessed is she who believed ... Blessed are *they* who believe. Both Elizabeth and Mary believe that God's promises will be fulfilled. They believe that God's promises *are being* fulfilled. Through these women and the sons they carry, the Holy One is bringing new life to birth — not only for two families awaiting children, not only for a nation awaiting a Messiah, but for a world awaiting hope and peace and joy and love. Elizabeth and Mary know in their bodies that new life is imminent. They know in their hearts that the sons they carry will bless the world. And they know something else, too ... Like Anna — the church housekeeper who watered and watched and waited — these mothers-to-be know that new life takes both faith and tending. So, Elizabeth and Mary tend new life in ways we would expect. With their bodies, they shelter and nurture the children growing in their wombs. As the months pass, I imagine they busy their hands with sewing and sprucing and setting up space for an addition to the family. And — no doubt — with every subtle kick or leap of joy, their hearts delight in the very real signs of new life. But that is not all. They also tend this new life with their voices. With words of prophecy and blessing, through beatitude and song, Elizabeth and Mary testify to promises fulfilled. For the Holy One is at work. Through

Elizabeth's son, God is raising up a prophet to prepare the way of the Lord. Through Mary's Son, God is coming into the world as Love Incarnate, Emmanuel, God-with-Us. Yes, the Holy One is bringing about new life that will transform the world. Blessed is she who believed God's promises would be fulfilled. And blessed is she whose faith led to affirmation and action — who tended the promise with prophecy and praise. Blessed is she who became an instrument of God's saving work.

As I see it, this blessing befits *both* these women: Mary — the one whom all generations call 'blessed;' *and* Elizabeth — the one who first blessed God's greatest gift of love. And this blessing befits anyone who stands between the World-That-Is and the World-That-Is-To-Come and testifies to what God is doing, to the new life God is bringing to birth. Blessed are they who rescue pots of dried up dirt from the rubbish bin, then water and watch and wait. Blessed are they who show up each and every day, trusting that they will find signs of life in the over-crowded ICU. Blessed are they who deliver fresh vegetables and school supplies and bottled water after a storm, because they believe God's not done with that neighborhood yet. Blessed are they who believe God's promises will be fulfilled, who become instruments of God's saving work. And blessed are we who witness the fruits of their faithfulness. For God does work to bring about new life, even in unlikely places.

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In the Andean mountains of Peru, you'll find one of the most contaminated places on the planet. It's a community called La Oroya. For years a U.S. owned metal smelter poisoned the land in and around this city with the toxic emissions of the mining process. Because of the lead, arsenic, mercury and cadmium in the soil, the land is barren; food must be shipped into the area because the community cannot grow its own produce. And the contaminants have poisoned the population, as well. At this point, more than half of La Oroya's children have extreme levels of lead in their blood. From the outside, it seems like a hopeless place — the kind of place that could not possibly sustain new life. But even in La Oroya there are hearts willing to say 'yes' despite the world's 'no.' Even in La Oroya, there are prophets and midwives of the world's rebirth. Like the Conservation Committee of Villa El Sol.¹ This is a small group of seniors who looked out on the white-washed tracts of rock face surrounding their community and, somehow, believed new life was possible. So they came up with a plan — a plan to plant trees that would restore life to this barren wasteland. With shovels and picks they began to till and turn the soil. And now — 20 years later — the Conservation Committee has planted upwards of 30,000 trees. Every day they care for these very real signs of new life, often watering them by hand using recycled soda bottles. Blessed are they who believed ...

And there are others. Like Yolanda Zurita.² For years, Yolanda has fought alongside her fellow citizens, demanding relief from the millions of pounds of toxins that have been dumped on their community. This fall, she finally had an audience with someone who can effect change — the Prime Minister of Peru. Last month Yolanda took a seat in the halls of power and helped negotiate a law that would bring relief to La Oroya through health services, environmental cleanup, and new protection measures ... things that will help to restore life. Blessed is she who believed ...

Yes, blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. Blessed are they who — like Elizabeth and Mary and Anna the housekeeper and Yolanda the activist — become instruments of God's saving work. Blessed are they who — like the Conservation Committee of Villa El Sol — believe new life is possible. Blessed are we who witness the fruits of their faithfulness. And blessed are *all* who trust in God's promises and tend God's vision of new life.

NOTES

1. "A sign of life in one of the most contaminated places on the planet," Presbyterian News Service, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/a-sign-of-life-in-one-of-the-most-contaminated-places-on-the-planet/>
2. "Years of accompaniment by global partners and U.S. Presbyterians breathe new life into La Oroya, Peru," Presbyterian News Service, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/years-of-accompaniment-by-global-partners-and-u-s-presbyterians-breathe-new-life-into-la-oroya-peru/>

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Weaver of the world and Spinner of the stars, thank you for the precious gift of life, for the beauty of our planet, for opportunities to love, and for the guidance of Scripture that points the way to a rich life. We are particularly grateful for this special season when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. As we near the day of celebration, our minds are flooded with memories of past Christmases. We remember the delight of gatherings with family and friends, the abundant tables of delicious food and drink, the excitement of sharing gifts, the uplifting moments in worship, and the singing of favorite carols that make our hearts swell and our lips quiver. May we recall those occasions when we felt especially close to loved ones and connected to you – when love and tenderness were palpable and we were aglow with your Spirit. We pray that this Christmas our souls will be saturated with wonder and delight.

Everlasting God, during these dark days when a deadly virus stalks our planet, when violence is rampant, when natural disasters snatch lives, when racism divides our communities, when poverty imprisons, when fear of foreigners turns hearts cold, and when political differences turn spirits mean, we pray that Christ will come into our lives again and again.

Immanuel, fill our hearts with compassion, not only for people like ourselves, but for all people of good will;
Bread of Life, kindle a spirit of generosity toward those who struggle to put food on their tables and to find a safe place to sleep;
Good Shepherd, foster empathy for those facing the loss of their job;
Wonderful Counselor, stir a desire to forgive those who have hurt us and the will to reconcile relationships needing repair;
Light of the World, revive a thirst for justice, so that all may be liberated, and treated with fairness and equity;
Prince of Peace, drench us with a passion for peace, so that the time, the energy, and the money that are devoted to divisiveness, violence and weapons of war may be redirected to food, housing, education, and healing.

Gracious God, as time moves us ever closer to the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus, open our hearts, open our minds, open our souls so that Christ may be born in us again and again, infusing us with love. Despite the darkness that surrounds us, despite the fractures in our relationships, despite the difficulties in our lives and the trouble in our souls, implant a spirit of joy within us so that we might lock arms with one another and become partners with you in transforming the world. And now we unite our voices in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.