



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Blessed? Really?”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Luke 1: 39-56

December 13, 2015 – Music Sunday

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” Really? Blessed? I’m sorry – but, I just don’t think that’s the reply most of us would have given in that moment!

Let’s put this in context. While we don’t have any direct evidence of Mary’s age, it is generally understood that Mary would have been barely a teen, much less an adult by any modern standards. The custom of the Jewish traditions at the time was that betrothal – that pledging to become married, as Mary was to Joseph – typically happened at 12 or 13 years old. So, the fact that Mary was betrothed tells us that she was likely somewhere in that pre-teen to early teenage range. And, in general, things are looking pretty good for her.

She’s met a nice man named Joseph, from Nazareth, with whom she plans to spend her life. There’s nothing extraordinary in front of them. Joseph is a carpenter – a man of simple means – but he was a respected man who would care for her, and their faith and their expectations for their future were strong. She had a good life to look forward to – and then Gabriel shows up! Now, perhaps I’m a cynic in this way, but I have to imagine that this would not be good news to most of us! Blessed? Really?

This visit wasn’t a promise of glory for Mary. This annunciation didn’t come with balloons and confetti for the new baby that was going to be born. This news meant that Mary was going to be a 13 year old unwed mother who would be seen by everyone as an adulteress and an outcast. The best case scenario in Mary’s mind had to be that Joseph would divorce her, but by no means would she have been unaware of the worst case scenario – in which Joseph would have had her stoned for adultery. She was going to be shamed, left on her own, cast aside, divorced, and maybe worse – and, that’s just what she might have imagined in that moment – it’s nothing of what she actually experienced as the mother of Jesus. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” Really?

You know, there's a lot of debate in the history of Christianity about the role and import of Mary in our faith. Virgin Birth, Immaculate Conception, Mother of God – all these theological terms and concepts are thrown out and batted around. But, I have to say, I think we miss so much when we get wrapped up in these theological debates and fail to pay sufficient attention to Mary's response to this mind-blowing annunciation. Faced by God's angel, Gabriel, and confronted with the news that she would be an integral part of God's plan unfolding in this world, she knows of the detriment it could mean for her – she is fully aware of what she will likely face in light of this happening in her life – but she doesn't run, she doesn't hide, she doesn't object, she doesn't cower, she doesn't abnegate, debate, disagree, flounder, fluster, misdirect, barter, beg, bargain, or in any other way try to get out of what was being asked of her or avoid the implications of God's call. No – in the face of a mind-blowing annunciation and a deeply disturbing prognosis for the course of her life – Mary says, “May it be to me as you have said.” And, then she proclaims herself blessed.

There's a lot of debate about the role and import of Mary in our faith, but, in a 21st century American culture in which...

- our prayers happen when we have the time,
- our worship is increasingly based on our convenience,
- our service is ever-more dictated by which hour we managed to carve out of the calendar,
- and our discipleship is that which gets attention once we've addressed the 72 more important priorities that we hold in our lives,

I think Mary deserves a bit of our attention. Because Mary, at some 13 years old, was faced with ridicule, abandonment, misfortune, abjection, and even harm – but, none of that mattered. Because Mary, at some 13 years old, discovered that God had a plan for her. And for Mary, at some 13 years old, nothing else mattered – and, I would suggest that it is because of that faith, that every generation since has, in fact, counted her blessed!