

The Paradox of Blessedness

Genesis 22:13-19

Luke 1: 39-56

December 8, 2013 -- Advent 2; **11:15 AM**

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

I was listening this week to one of the many tributes to President Mandela, and the commentator was talking about the early years of Mr. Mandela's struggle and then his arrest and trial and how there had been a broad expectation that the trial was going to sort of bring an end at least to his part of this leadership's struggle and his decision to, rather than defend himself in the trial, to use the trial as a vehicle to continue the struggle and to highlight the injustice of the apartheid system.

We are continuing today our journey in Advent with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who like Mr. Mandela, found herself at a point of crisis as an unwed pregnant teenager, a situation that in our day would upend the life of any person, any young woman, and in her day, of course, had the additional added layer of being essentially a capital crime, that she risked her life as she accepted this pregnancy.

II. Visiting Elizabeth

We're going to talk a little bit this morning about the way that God uses crisis points to invite us into a place where we have the opportunity to change the world around us. And Mary's experience is a helpful reminder to us that what we tend to think of as blessedness often doesn't feel that way when we're being blessed. Because, see, she's a helpful reminder in that we very easily get caught up in the idea

that if we're living the right way, God is going to reward us somehow with an easy or successful life. That takes its sort of crudest form in what we call in theological circles the prosperity gospel: if we live the right kind of way, God's going to shower us with expensive cars and beautiful houses and all of those wonderful things. And while I'm not, of course, above manipulating you all for money, I'm going to at least use good theology when I do it! But the prosperity gospel takes a somewhat more subtle form with most of us. Even if we kind of sort of intellectually laugh at that idea, most of us walk around with a sense that if things are going well, it must be because we're living the way God wants us to live, right? You actually hear this in people's language in the reverse more often which is when some tragedy happens to someone, one of the first things that people often say is, "But he or she was living such a good life," as if that should counteract the fact that tragedy sometimes enters people's lives.

Whenever I ask a pastor friend of mine how she is doing, she says, "I'm blessed and highly favored." And when Mary meets Elizabeth in this wonderful next chapter in her story, the first thing Elizabeth experiences is this leaping of John the Baptist in her womb, and she responds immediately to Mary by saying, "Blessed are you among women." But again, it's not the kind of blessing that most of us think about when we think of being blessed. Because, of course, Mary is in a pretty challenging situation even at this point.

She has accepted God's call on her life as conveyed by Gabriel, but she's still got the threat of death hanging over her. She's got to figure out how to make things right with her fiancé. She's got nine months of ridicule to live through in this small village in which she lives. And frankly, even when all that is done, she's still got a

pretty rough road ahead of her, right? Because she is going to be raising a son who Luke makes clear she doesn't really understand. And at some point in his adulthood, that son's going to come to her and Joseph and say, "You know what, I've decided not to follow the family business and become a carpenter. I'm actually going to be an unemployed, itinerant preacher," so you can imagine that conversation.

And then this unemployed, itinerant preacher ends up being arrested and tried and executed as a political criminal. This life is not one that any of us would necessarily think of as blessed. What Mary makes clear is that blessedness is not about having your desires met. It really is a process of having those desires stripped away so that God can start to work, and that's what this story is about.

III. The Binding of Isaac

This theme is also made abundantly clear in the story from Genesis that we heard this morning, the binding of Isaac. Again, you have a story of Abraham who had such great hopes and dreams and watching those dreams get stripped away. Abraham had been promised descendants that were more numerous than the stars, and he waits 100 years to start to see that dream come to fruition. A few years earlier, he had fathered Ishmael and thought that maybe Ishmael would be the answer to his prayers. And then, in his 100th year, he and Sarah are blessed with Isaac. And you can sort of imagine Abraham feeling like, "okay, it's been 100 years but this thing is finally starting to come together. God's promise is really starting to work itself out."

And then, in the chapter immediately prior to this, there's the blow-up between Hagar and Sarah, and Hagar and Ishmael are banished from the family circle, and

then, God turns around and commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. All of his hopes and dreams placed in the person of his son. All of how he expected God's plan to unfold on the shoulders of this young man. And a lot of the early Christian and Jewish saints have talked about the fact that the reason this journey to the place of sacrifice takes three days in the story is because God needed Abraham and Isaac both to have that time to live into what was about to happen.

And there's an interesting story from the Jewish Midrash on this story in which one of the early rabbis says that as Abraham and Isaac and the two servants were traveling towards God's mountain, Abraham asks Isaac, "Do you see what I see?" And Isaac replied, "I see a mountain, radiant in majesty with a mysterious cloud hovering over it." Abraham asks the two servants, "Do you see anything?" And they replied, "We see nothing other than stretches of wilderness." See, what that journey is about in this story is the journey of letting all of the hopes and expectations that they had get stripped away so that they can see the reality that is before them, and in that clarity, they are prepared to be the vehicles that God needs them to be.

Throughout this fairly short story, the writer uses the verb "to see" five times and twice he talks about Abraham lifting up his eyes. There is a process of clarity of vision. And the interesting idea there is the reality that the servants see is not reality. They see what's there. What Abraham and Isaac start to see is the reality that God has prepared. And there's something about this process of having stripped away everything they wanted that allows this to happen.

IV. Conclusion

This is, I think, a pretty key Advent idea for us because most of us spend our Advent thinking about what we want, right? We're plotting out our Christmas list. And while we're all sophisticated enough to know that God or that Jesus and Santa Claus are not the same person, we still carry around this sense that Jesus is watching out who's naughty and nice, and we still treat our prayers much as we do our Christmas list, "Here are the things that I want to happen," and we spend our Advent literally making out those Christmas lists. Part of what Mary's example is about is the reverse process, of letting go of all of those hopes and dreams as we seek to place ourselves in the place where we can become vehicles of God's transforming power in the world. And in many ways, of course, this is what Nelson Mandela's 27 years in prison was about, is a process of stripping away all of the hopes and dreams that he had for his life and then coming out at the far end, prepared to be a different kind of leader, prepared to be a vehicle of God's transforming love and power.

I read an article this week in the *Huffington Post*, written by J.C. Austin, a professor at Auburn Theological Seminary. He wrote about a moment 15 years ago, 1998, when he had had an opportunity to see President Mandela speak at a World AIDS Day event. He talks about the fact that it had been logistically poorly laid out and there had been this crush of people trying to get in that couldn't get in and the police started getting nervous and they pulled out their batons and reinforcements came in. It started looking very volatile and he talked about his own fear because he was sort of in the front of that crush of people as they were moving forward and he felt himself being pushed towards this line of police with their batons out. He says at the moment in which the crowd is starting to surge forward, the police are bracing for a conflict, he

says, "I felt a blast of energy sweep from the front of this vast room. Nelson Mandela had arrived, and just by being present, he changed the reality in the room, reminding everyone of who and how they wanted to be."

He goes on and writes, "The true greatness of Mandela, the most profound miracle he performed was that he made his supporters, his enemies, and his admirers around the world believe that the world could change, could be redeemed. He made all of us believe that the way things are is not the way things have to be. He made us believe that we could be part of making that change happen and become miracle workers ourselves."

Advent is the time in which we prepare to become miracle workers. We prepare to allow the Christ to be born in our lives as we strip away our plans, our ambitions, and our desires and allow the spirit of God to move in, to take hold of who we are and make us who we were meant to be. That is the preparation of Advent.

Amen.