

December 1, 2024

You are a Blessing: Advent Week 1

Kristina Stone Kaiser

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON - Isaiah 43:1-7

SERMON

Dominic and I recently rewatched the movie *Family Man* with Nicolas Cage and Tea Leoni. Does anyone **know it?**

The basic plot is that **Jack** – a *wealthy New York City banker* is given a **glimpse** into what life could be like if and when **life isn't centered** primarily around **money and power**. And, as you'd imagine, it's a **jarring experience**. He just wakes up one Christmas morning in another life, married to his high school sweetheart with 2 kids and a home in New Jersey – which, as you can imagine, is **terrifying**.

And in the midst of all of that, Jack is accompanied at certain moments by his **best friend Arnie** who, at one point, **gives Jack advice** that Jack had first given to him, if you can follow that. It's really Jack's own advice coming back to him. But we hear Arnie say:

Don't [mess] up the best thing in your life just because you're a little unsure about who you are.

And I've always been taken by the end of this line in particular...**just because you're a little unsure about who you are.**

Isn't this all of us sometimes? We might not always call it this, but don't we all sometimes say to ourselves things like:

"I don't exactly know what I'm doing right now."

"I don't know if I should make this choice or that one."

"Did I say or do the right thing back there?"

So many times in our lives we run up against these moments where we're **just a little bit unsure about who we are.**

This is where we **begin today**. On this first day of the Advent season together, our journey begins with **remembering who we are.**

And, already in our First Scripture Reading, in **Isaiah 43 and verse 1** we've heard

I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.

And then a couple of verses later in verse 4 we heard:

[Y]ou are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.

Repeat after me:

- I am redeemed!
- I have been called by name!
- I am God's own!
- I am precious in God's sight.
- I am honored.
- I am loved.

That is the message we receive today from Isaiah 43.

Fast forward, then, roughly 700 years and we hear this from our:

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "**Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.**"

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "**Do not be afraid**, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

RESPONSE

For your words that tell stories, your words that make us laugh and cry, your words that make us think, **Thank you, God.**

PRAYER

Lord, as we take some time with these words this morning, may they penetrate the stories of our hearts and minds. May we feel the truth of them in our bodies. And may we experience the presence of your Spirit among us. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

So thinking back to what we just read, Luke Chapter 1 and verse 26 tells us this:

[T]he angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth

...Mary was **from Galilee**. Doesn't that **sound nice?**

Where are you from?

Galilee.

Oh, that's very nice...

...we might say.

But this is **not what they would have said** in Jesus' day. Galilee was in the **northern region Israel**. We also live in the north – so **same – same. But different.**

Galilee was known for its **uprisings and protests**. So...if we put ourselves in the shoes of others at that time...maybe Galileans are perceived as:

"Those people up there who cause a lot of trouble and make a lot of noise..."

And, in fact, it was worse than that still. The people of Galilee were considered to be "**lesser Jews.**"

- Many of them were **uncircumcised**
- They **didn't necessarily worship in the temple.**
- They often **married non-Jewish people**

All of this went **against the customs** of their time. And we kind of know this. In **John 1:46**, Nathaniel asks flat out: *Does anything good come from Nazareth?*

But the **angel Gabriel** says something very different.

In **Verse 28 of Luke Chapter 1**, we hear Gabriel say to Mary: *Greetings, favored one!*

Now...this is all very nice for Mary, yes. Gabriel gave good news to Mary...but as **Luke 2:10** tells us...that good news was to be a joy to ALL PEOPLE.

...in other words...the **story continues with us**. Consider these scriptures with me for a moment

Galatians 3:26 & 28

²⁶ *for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.*

And then in Verse 28

²⁸ *...for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*

1 John 3:1

¹ *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.*

The **fundamental, far-reaching truth** of the Gospel story is: **You are a blessing.**

What an **important** and **radical statement**: *You are a blessing.*

Many of us **struggle** to take that in, perhaps because...so **many messages** in our **lived-out experience and culture** tell us that we will need to **prove ourselves** and that we will **never be done proving** ourselves.

And so we **strive** and we **fight** and we **hope** that **we're enough**...and even when someone **pays us a compliment**, we **defer**...

Repeat after me, Friends:

- *I am redeemed!*
- *I have been called by name!*
- *I am God's own!*
- *I am precious in God's sight.*
- *I am honored.*
- *I am loved.*

In John, Chapter 1 and Verse 5 we hear:

⁵ *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

This is **one of my favorite passages**. From time to time...don't we all wonder: *Is the darkness overcoming the light?*

We ask this question outwardly as well as inwardly. *Am I good enough? Are the people around me good enough?*

Now...the **King James Version of John 1:5** reads slightly differently than the translation I just read you. In the King James Version we hear:

[T]he darkness did not comprehend it

All of these translations are close, but the **original Greek** word there roughly reads as saying "to acquire" or "to lay hold of."

The light of the world is coming, has come, is here.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not acquired it. The darkness has not laid hold of it.

Matthew 5:14: "You are the light of the world."

Isaiah 43:1: *I have called you by name.*

You are a blessing.

Someone say it again: *I am a blessing.*

This is such an important thing for us to internalize. In **Matthew 22:37-40**, Jesus teaches that all we learned about how to be can be summed up in **two commandments** – *to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself*. And then in **Romans 13:9**, Paul tells us: *If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will have also loved God with all your heart, soul, and mind.*

This "as ourselves" part is so **important**. When we **cannot believe** that *we are a blessing to God*, we will **also struggle to believe this about others**.

To help us with this, I have a song I want to offer us today. Some of you may know it. It's called "*More Precious than Silver.*")

And now, as we play it again, we're going to imagine that the Lord is singing this song to us. So we're going to **change the lyric** to "*Child.*"

I want to invite you to **receive this as a blessing over you**, as **God's words directly to you**. And so offer yourself a posture that communicates openness to you.

...Friends...When we are **rooted in our own blessedness**, it is **then** that we can **treat every created being as a blessing as well**.

As our **Advent season begins**, we take time today to **connect** with our own **sacred place** in the **Divine Interconnected Web of Being**.

You are a blessing—known, chosen, and called for a purpose.

SERMON CLOSING PRAYER

As you hear these words today: May you boldly **live into this truth**, recognizing and cherishing your **inherent worth** so that you may **honor God's image in others**. May you **trust in your belovedness** as you enter the redemptive work God has invited you into this Advent season. In Jesus' Name, Amen.