Messengers: The Blessed Woman Memory Verse: Luke 1:52

December 10th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:13-21

TITLE SLIDE

 Last week we began our time of Advent. A time of waiting and a time of expecting great things from our great God. We have said Advent is a time of prayer, of coming to the Lord and allowing him to shape our expectations. And I think if we are honest, most of us don’t really expect much from God. We sort of expect what’s normal. In fact, it’s dangerous to get your expectations too high because then you very well might be disappointed. That’s why prayer is so crucial. Our communication to God puts to rest our fears as we learn to trust him more and more. More prayer means more trust and more trust means higher expectations. So here at Forest Hills we want to provide some opportunities to pray more! That is what our PAX teams are all about. PAX stands for Prayer Awakens Expectation and simply provides an opportunity to connect in prayer with fellow believers…is there a better way to spend our time? Please consider joining up with a PAX team this week!

 So as we approach Advent this time around we are trying to pay special attention to the Messengers of Advent, to those who deliver the Word of God. Last week, we listened to Gabriel, the angel, the heavenly messenger who came to deliver an absolutely absurd word to an unassuming young girl in Nazareth. She was to bear a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, a son who will reign over an everlasting kingdom, a son who will be God’s son. But Gabriel closes his absurd message with this sobering truth: Nothing is impossible for God!

**SLIDE 2: Nothing is impossible for God!**

 That is where we left off last week and that is where we pick up again today: Nothing is impossible for God. These are the words Gabriel left with Mary, the words she had to sit with after her encounter with God’s messenger: Nothing is impossible with God. These are the words that rang through her head and her heart as she pondered what was to be her unplanned future: Nothing is impossible for God. Mary hears these words spoken to her by the angel Gabriel, and Luke records for us her response. She said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

 It may very well be that our Catholic brothers and sisters have a bit of an upper hand on us when it comes to talking about this remarkable young woman named Mary. Certainly, we would not go to the lengths of esteeming her as totally immaculate or designating prayers in her name.

**SLIDE 3: Alfred Delp**

But we would do well to see her in the light of the Blessed Woman as Father Alred Delp calls her. I have turned to Delp for some help when it comes to this Advent season. Delp was a Jesuit Priest who served as pastor over a church in Munich called St. Georg in the 1940’s. While there, Delp was invited to join with an underground group that sought to establish unity among those who actively resisted Hitler’s regime. Sure enough, on July 28th 1944, Alfred Delp was arrested on the sidewalk just outside of his parish…never again to be a free man.

 I first came to know about Alfred Delp from a book of collected essays all about Advent. His words struck me as the editors had shared that they were written from his prison cell shortly before his execution that took place on Feb. 2nd, 1945. Due to the nature of our New Testament, we as Christians, are primed and ready to hear Godly wisdom from imprisoned teachers. We are aware that the specter of one’s end of life can bring a powerful clarity to the truth of the present day. In his essay, Delp singles out the importance of Mary, the blessed woman. He says of Mary that she is the most comforting of all the Advent figures because in Mary, the message of Advent was met with a “ready heart.” “Let it be with me as you have said,” she replies to the angel. Let it be as you have said because, after all, I am the Lord’s servant.

We need to stop here for a moment and grapple with the nature of servanthood. To be a servant is a concept largely lost on us. We typically deem servitude an inhumane and inappropriate role. People should not have servants. We can employ assistants, gophers, those who run errands, but to use the term servant is archaic and in bad taste. But the fact is, Mary dons the title for herself. In fact, technically the Greek term Mary uses, *doule,* is the term that is used to indicate a slave. But we are not dealing with a woman of low self-esteem or poor self-concept…we are dealing with a woman of faith, who possess within her a ready heart. She is not just a slave to some owner or even a slave to her soon-to-be husband, Mary is a slave to the Lord, and as such, her attitude is, “Let what he has declared be true of me, for I live only to serve him.”

**SLIDE 4: “Let what he has declared be true of me, for I live only to serve him.”**

 Can you imagine that level of willingness? Can you imagine giving such a response? I cannot…Indeed all of scripture cannot. Think of the greats, the past heroes of the faith…Abraham seems to be ready to serve God but yet was promised a son and engaged his wife’s maidservant into the equation. A bit of a hiccup in his readiness. Moses argued with God right there at the burning bush about taking on the role of leader and deliverer of God’s people. He was certainly not ready. Gideon tested God with a hunk of sheep’s wool, not once, but twice! King David seems like a bright spot. He doesn’t hesitate to take on Goliath, he is known as a man after God’s own heart, until his eyes spy a beautiful woman. Even the great prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah express some hesitancy. But Mary stand out above all these as one willing to serve her Lord with absolute readiness. Would any of us have blamed her if she raised her hand with a couple of questions? Could it have been held against her if she asked for a little time to think it all through?

 In Luke chapter one, Mary does ask a question. Gebriel lets her know that she is being honored by God, that she will have an extraordinary son who will be named Jesus. He will be known as the Son of the Most High and will rule on David’s throne. At this point, as amazing as that news is…it’s all fairly normal stuff compared to what is to come. Of course she would have kids, of course she would seek the Lord’s favor, but Mary had to ask about the timing of it all. In verse 34, she asks Gabriel, “How will this happen since I haven’t had sexual relations with a man? Then Gabriel responds with the really head-spinning stuff. “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will over shadow you. Therefore the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son….Nothing is impossible for God.” There is no, “What?” from Mary. No “Come again? What does that mean?” There is only readiness. She asked her question, she got her answer. She was ready.

 After this experience, Mary heads to visit Elizabeth, whose own baby jumps within her womb. She says to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women…Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises made to her.”

**SLIDE 5: Luke 1:46: “With all my heart I glorify the Lord!”**

 Then Mary breaks into a song, a song that I want to look rather closely if we could, Luke 1:46: “With all my heart I glorify the Lord!” The word here is actually magnify, to enlarge, to make more clear. Think of what Mary’s experience actually was. Her whole body was involved with this magnifying process as slowly but surely, a son grows within her. As each week passes, Jesus the human will in fact become more and more magnified. I think back to all the times my wife and I went to ultrasound appointments.

**SLIDE 6: Ultrasound**

It’s this amazing process in which you get to see an actual image of the baby that is growing in the womb. Now I will admit, I do not see what the sonographer sees. A blurry blob to her is a specific limb or a beating heart, and these things can apparently be measured. But no matter how blurry the image might appear; the women in the room will always proclaim that the baby is cute. I hold a bit more reservation simply because we don’t know yet, but the exclamation is welcome. There is the miracle of life magnified in that womb. Now, as the pregnancy progresses, all the features of the baby come more into focus. At some point, even a layman like me can see the eyes and the hands as the details continue to develop. Through Mary, the whole world would be able to know God in a whole new, up close and personal way, God magnified. “In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.” Again, we can read slave there. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored  because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.”

**SLIDE 7: “In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.”**

We can see here Mary’s trust in these promises. She thinks of them, or at least speaks of them as past tense. There has been no change in her status. She is still the same Mary, engaged to the same carpenter, living in the same small town. There is no money come in now that she is favored. Nobody outside her small sphere even knows who she is. In what way is she considered highly favored? At this point, only in the form of promises made, only in the reality of what is to come. Yet, in these promises that pertain to the future, Mary places her trust.
He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next,  who honors him as God.He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”

**SLIDE 8: He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next,  who honors him as God.He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”**

This again shows Mary’s confidence in God’s promises. We must remember that shortly after this pregnancy, after Jesus is born, Mary will be forced to flee with Joseph to Egypt in order to find safety for his life. We read this morning Matthew’s account of Kings Herod’s insane mandate to have all babies under two years old killed. So the powers that be, in this case, King Herod, do not at all seem to be pulled from their thrones. In fact, they seem to be ramping up their evil intentions and even displacing the very woman through whom these great promises will come. Let me just ask, in our world today, do we see arrogant rulers being pulled down from their thrones? It certainly does not seem like it. But Mary exemplifies a longer view. Let me return to Alfred Delp, sitting in his Nazi prison cell. His life was also greatly affected by arrogant, powerful men. And in his time of detainment, he was able to write these words of faith about Mary, words that fly in the face of his present experience. Because of Advent, Delp says, “The world has come under a different law. We are not speaking of only historical events that happened once, on which our salvation rests. Advent is the promise denoting the new order of things, of life, of our existence. We must remember today with courage that the blessed woman of Nazareth foreshadows the light in our midst today. Deeper down in our being, our days and our destinies, too, bear the blessing and mystery of God.” Does that ring true for you? Do your days bear the blessing and mystery of God? Do you know the blessing and mystery of God? If you don’t, let me just say that Advent is a perfect time to enter in. As we celebrate the apex of the mystery, as we reach the height of things we can’t put our hands around, that’s the perfect time to let faith step in, to join with Mary in saying, “I don’t understand all this, but I will trust.” Delp continues; “The blessed woman waits, and we must wait too until her hour has come.” We wait, just as Mary waited, in trust, in faith. May we wait in her confidence as she continues her song: “He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,”

**SLIDE 9: “He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,”**

This remembering is an important part of our faith. What God has done in the past informs what is to come in the future. We might hear history teachers defend their role by saying, “He who does not learn history is bound to repeat it.” And while I think that is true, there is also a sense in which he who does not learn history, does not know what is to come. History informs us that our God is a promise keeping God, he can be trusted and what he says he will do, he will do. We look forward to the future in light of the past. We remember God’s mercy. Mary’s song concludes:  “just as he promised to our ancestors to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”

**SLIDE 10: “just as he promised to our ancestors to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”**

We learn from the apostle Paul that you and I are indeed Abraham’s descendants for Abraham is our father by faith! We are expressly included in all of this! And Mary expresses this same faith as she takes on this call to carry and provide for, to raise up and to love, to parent Jesus, the Son of God.

 Mother Mary, meek and mild, she may be the most comforting of the Advent figures. She may be the most gentle and discreet, the most agreeable, but we dare not miss out on her strength. The audacity of her faith, her swiftness to serve her God faithfully with her heart, soul, mind and certainly all her physical strength. Mary is a pinnacle of power for us to look upon and consider as we make our way through a broken and corrupt world; a world in which the centers of power do not seem to be budging.

 I want to close with one more thought from Father Delp, a question he raises about the purpose of Advent: “What good does it do us to sense and feel our misery unless a bridge is thrown over to the other shore? What good does it do to shiver in the coldness and hardness in which the world freezes as it goes deeper astray in itself and kills itself, unless we also come to know of the grace that is mightier than the peril of oblivion?”

**SLIDE 11: QUOTE**

 In Mary, we witness a grace that is mightier than oblivion. We see a messenger of Advent who truly delivers God’s word, verbally and physically. And that word is Jesus: God saves. Amen.