

series of promises and in the pause that follows, Mary affirms her desire to participate in this miracle. She says yes. Yes, knowing the shape of things to come. Yes to the risk of loving someone you know will live an extraordinary and harrowing and beautiful and heartbreaking life. Yes to the audacious and amazing grace of agreeing to give birth to the one she will eventually watch die on the cross. Whether she knew the precise details is irrelevant. In those simple words, ‘Let it be...’ and with all that follows, Mary is giving all who would follow a better glimpse of who God is.”⁴

Mary helps us see and understand God’s blessings. She helps us see that we, too, are blessed by God. That we are beloved, redeemed, precious in God’s sight. When we know that clearly, then we, like her, can say yes to God. We can say yes to the callings of God. Even though they will challenge us. Even though there will be sacrifices. Even though we cannot imagine what is yet to come. God says yes to us—not because we are particularly good or faithful servants, but because God chooses to love us. And in deepest gratitude, we say yes to following God.

This season, as we begin another new year in our faith, we wait for Christ’s coming with expectation. We prepare to serve. We listen to God’s leading. The quilt of blessing that enfolds us is comforting and warm. And it carries with it the love from the past and the hope of what is yet to come.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



December 1, 2024
First Sunday of Advent
“Blessed are You”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 1:26-28

Advent is here. We have made it to the angel’s announcement to Mary of Jesus’ coming birth. We have greenery and candles, twinkle lights and banners welcoming us here. We are journeying through hope, peace, joy, and love on our way to Emmanuel, God with us. This season is busy and full for many people. Yet plenty of us still look forward to the comfort and grounding it provides as we prepare for Jesus to be born in the manger again. The memories, the music, the lights, the gift-giving—all the stories and traditions of Advent can feel like wrapping up in a warm quilt, like feeling its heft cover your shoulders and the love in each of its stitches.

Some of the words used in the Bible translation of this story, though, lack that warm hug feeling. I once read someone talk about the angel’s greeting to Mary like it was a stilted alien: “Greetings, favored one.” I’ve had trouble putting that thought out of my head since. Those words in our Bibles are properly translated from the original Greek, but they’re a little bereft of emotion. There are not very many times I prefer the King James Version of the Bible, but this story might be one of them. In that translation, the angel says, “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” Or even in a modern translation (Contemporary English Version), the angel says to Mary, “You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you!”

The angel spoke God’s truth to Mary. She began with blessedness. Not the kind of “blessed” that declares how *good* your life is; as if everything were just hunky dory. No, Mary began with a kind of blessedness that had nothing to do with her life being good or easy or even happy. Her life in that ancient world might not have been that good. She was poor. She lived in the backwater of Galilee, which people thought was just a place for uprisings and protests. People in her northern region often did not worship in the temple and many of them married non-Jewish people, so they were looked down on.¹ Not to mention that the patriarchal world she lived in certainly put strict limits on Mary and her life’s expectations.

1 Kelly Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 39.
2 Kayla Craig, “Commentary, First Sunday of Advent, Words for the Beginning, You are a Blessing,” *Sanctified Art*, 2024, p. 6.
3 Patricia Polacco, *The Keeping Quilt*, Simon & Schuster, 2001.
4 Laurie Lyter Bright, “The Rebellious Nature of Mary, and the Role of Consent in the Advent Season,” *Unbound*, Dec 14, 2022, <https://justiceunbound.org/the-rebellious-nature-of-mary-and-the-role-of-consent-in-the-advent-season/>

So the angel's declaration that Mary was favored and blessed by God was radical. This blessedness was true from her beginning. It was her starting point. Like the prophet Isaiah proclaimed on behalf of God: "I have called you by name, you are mine. You are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you." God's blessing did not come because Mary had been a good girl. Or because she had proved herself worthy of God's love. God's blessing came *first*, well before any angel showed up in her life. As Kayla Craig writes, "We often feel compelled to earn our worth and belovedness, but the One who grants each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God's infinite love, we are beloved, the very fibers of our being woven with care. We can't work our way to receiving God's compassion. It's already there—as present as the twinkling stars in the sky, as near as the clouds of breath on a cold night."²

I have always thought *blessing* was a hard word to define. We all kind of know what it means, but it's hard to get at all the feelings and meanings that the notion of *being blessed by God* carries with it. This year we are using images of quilts to guide us through the Advent season. You'll see quilts on the bulletin cover, in our social media in the coming month, and in the banner gracing the chancel. The quilts will speak to us in many ways this season—from the hands who make them, to the protection from cold they offer, to the way their many pieces fit together to make a whole. When we think of our story today, quilts, like blessings, wrap us up in comfort. They offer goodness, warmth, and love that shelters us. The big ones—quilts and blessings—can also be weighty, carrying with them hopes, memories, and promises.

My family has a picture book called *The Keeping Quilt* by Michigan author and illustrator Patricia Polacco. A woman tells the story of her family through a quilt that was first made when her Great Grandma Anna's Jewish family immigrated to the United States from Russia in the early part of the 20th century. When Great Grandma Anna was a girl, she outgrew the only dress she had. Once her mother had made her a new one, she took the old dress, along with her babushka scarf and a few old nightshirts and aprons from other family members, and they made a quilt. Anna's mother said, "We will make a quilt to help us always remember home. It will be like having the family back home dance around us at night."³ The neighbor ladies came over and they all stitched and sewed until the beautiful quilt was finished, made from memories of the past and hopes for the future.

The family slept under the quilt. But it was so much more than a blanket, too. The quilt served as the tablecloth for Sabbath dinners where they ate chicken soup and challah bread. It was laid down for a picnic when Great

Grandma Anna first met the man who would become her husband. The quilt then served as the chuppah for their wedding, the canopy that shelters a Jewish couple when they're married. Babies across the generations were wrapped in the quilt and all the love it held. When Anna was elderly, the quilt warmed her lap, as her family gathered round in her last days. The precious quilt kept being used to cover tables at birthday parties and to cuddle even more babies, all the way down to the author's own child.

The keeping quilt was a blessing. Its colors and fabrics held love and care in their fibers. It bore the sacrifices of people who came before. It promised goodness and security, even though it did not promise ease. The quilt offered comfort in the face of sorrow. For each person whose life was touched by it, the precious quilt was a sign and symbol that they were held close in love and hope.

Who knows if Mary had a quilt to call her own. But the blessing of God enveloped her just like a keeping quilt, and it traveled with her the whole length of her life. God claimed Mary and held her close. The blessing helped her know she was not alone. God whispered the scriptures and stories of the past to her, which she knew well and would sing about after the angel's announcement. God's love urged her into the future, unprepared for all that was to come, yet a willing servant.

This quilt of blessing that draped over Mary's shoulders was God's *yes* to her. It was a *yes* to the person she was and to what she would be able to do in service to her God. The gift of Jesus continues that same blessing and spreads it to all of us. Christ is God's *yes* to humanity. The blessing of God in Christ says *yes* to love and life; *yes* to rest and enjoyment, *yes* to gratitude, service, and generosity; *yes* to living in God's world God's way. God's blessing—God's *yes* to Mary—allowed her to say *yes* to God.

First, Mary was perplexed and she asked questions. This announcement from the angel didn't make any sense. But she was rooted enough in her blessedness to speak up. She believed the angel respected and cared for her enough to answer her questions. The angel did, of course. And then, scripture bothers to tell us that Mary said *yes* to the angel—"Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." It's not just "God said it and it was so." But rather, Mary agreed to make her life and her body a servant of the Lord.

A friend of mine from seminary has written about Mary's consent. Laurie Lyter Bright says this, "That might be the most radical thing of all...: Mary consents. If she had been saying *yes* out of ignorance, or given no agency in the matter, that would reveal a God who colonizes the body of a woman, a God fixated on exerting power. This God, however, announces a