
Advent #4: Be a blessing
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 22, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 1:26-35, 46-55

English is a strange language. Actually, most languages are probably strange, but English is the only language I know well enough to know how strange it is.

[image: ducks in a row]

For example, have you ever been told to “get your ducks in a row”? The phrase simply means that you need to get organized. How many of us even have any ducks? And how many ducks would you need in a row? Would you need more ducks - for example - to organize a holiday than you need to organize a trip to the mall? Perhaps 4 ducks in a row will only get you to the nearest Tim Hortons and you need at least 10 duck to plan a successful camping trip. These days, you’d have to be organized just to get the ducks in the first place. In other words you need to get your ducks in a row before you can get your ducks in a row. See - English is strange!

[image: bob’s your uncle]

Today, I am completely prepared for this service, and yet - strangely - I do not have an uncle who’s name is Robert. So is the phrase “Bob’s your uncle” true or false for me? It’s both true and false. English is strange!

[image: mad as a hatter]

Have you ever been “mad as a hatter”? Probably not. You might think that the phrase comes from “Alice in Wonderland” and that being “mad as a hatter” just means that you are a wonderfully interesting person. But the expression actually comes from 17th century France. At the time, the felting process used to make hats involved mercury, and hat makers often suffered from mercury poisoning, which made them appear to be mad. They were as mad as a hatter because they were hatters with mercury poisoning. English is strange!

[image: cold shoulder 1]

Have you ever been “given a cold shoulder”? I really doubt it. You might think

that the phrase refers to someone shrugging their shoulders at you with indifference.

[image: cold shoulder 2]

But when the phrase started being used in medieval England, it meant giving a house guest a cold shoulder of mutton or beef when the host thought the guest had overstayed their welcome. Today, most of us would probably see an offer of food as an invitation to stay longer. But it was actually the suggestion that you should go home! English is strange!

[image: toads in holes]

And don't get me started on what ingredients you need to make "toads in holes". English is strange!

Many English phrases mean something completely different from what the words themselves mean. And many English phrases - including ones that are used frequently - actually mean nothing at all.

Think about swearing. I won't offer any word suggestions here, but most swearing actually only means "I'm afraid of you", or "I don't like you", or frequently it only means, "I'm angry".

This is one reason why older swear words seem so ridiculous to us. For example, what does "Son of a gun" mean to you? It's completely meaningless for me.

[image: h e double hockey sticks]

Sometimes normal words are used in an odd way so that we are "allowed" to use a "bad" word without saying the actual word. People used to say, "H-E-double-hockey-sticks" as a way of saying "hell" without saying the word itself. I'm guessing that was before we had colour television and people had more time on their hands.

Swearing sounds like actual communication - particularly if you are on the receiving end. But usually swearing just expresses negative emotion with no actual content.

[image: trump swearing]

Take for example this individual. What he is expressing is 100% unregulated emotion and 0% actual content. Sometimes, swearing is what people do when they simply have nothing rational to say and they know they are wrong.

And if you are starting to wonder why we are talking about all this, it's because I believe that we also use words and phrases in English that express positive emotions with no actual content. Words and phrases that sound like actual communication, but which only give a positive emotion with no real content. Sort of like the reverse swearing. And one of those words is relevant this week. The word "blessing".

[image: blessing after a sneeze]

If you don't believe me, consider how people say "bless you" after you sneeze. I understand that this tradition comes from the idea that you are vulnerable when you sneeze because your mouth is open. Some people believe that when you sneeze, your soul comes out of your body and can therefore be snatched by the devil.

[image: after you sneeze three times]

Some people believe that when you sneeze, the devil can enter your body through your open mouth. Either way, the "solution" is to say "bless you" to the person immediately following the sneeze. But beyond reminding ourselves that our ancestors were actually quite superstitious, what does it mean to say, "bless you" when someone sneezes? What does it mean to say "blessing" at all?

[image: magnificat]

What does it mean when Mary says - as we just read - "from now on all generations will call me blessed"? Let me just repeat a short section from Mary's song - also called the Magnificat - in a different translation. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has looked favourably on the people and redeemed them. God has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of God's servant David. ... Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered our holy covenant"

Sounds familiar, right? Sorry - but I actually lied. That was not actually a different translation of what was read earlier. What I just read was a song by Zechariah, the father of John the baptizer. And yet it's essentially the same text as the song of Mary. Both the song of Zechariah and the song of Mary are in Luke Chapter 1 if you want to read them together yourself.

When we read Zechariah's song and Mary's song together, they both speak of blessing. And they are both pretty light on actual content. They are both simply

expressions of positive emotion, emotions like hope, promise, light, love.

And I do not mean that as a criticism. Read the news today and you'll probably find a complete absence of positive emotions, particularly hope, promise, light, and love. I'm happy to lift up and encourage hope, promise, light, and love. We need all the hope, promise, light and love that we can get these days. Essentially, that is what a blessing is anyway. It's an expression from one person to another that one person hopes that the other person will enjoy good things in life, like hope, promise, light, love. It's a positive emotion with not much content. And that is just fine.

[image: god bless sign]

Since it's Advent, I would encourage all of us to seek out as many blessings as we can. So where should we start? If you want a verbal blessing, I would suggest we all start by spending some time with people who offer blessings very openly. I would suggest we all spend some time with some of the people near where we live that we call "homeless". Because I can think of no other community of people who are so liberal giving out verbal blessings. For a loonie or a toonie, you will almost certainly hear someone say, "God bless you". And surely hearing that is worth far more than what you will pay.

[image: what do blessings look like?]

What if you want a non-verbal blessing? Well, the most reliable, predictable way to experience a non-verbal blessing is for us to go out of our way to be a blessing to others. Nothing feels quite as good as giving. This seems to work no matter what we give. We can give money of course. But we can also give our time, our attention, our compassion, our presence. All ministry is rooted in relationship, so there are lots of ways that we can give to others in meaningful ways. And giving to others is the 100% guaranteed way for us to feel blessed ourselves. We are blessed when we ourselves become a blessing to others.

During the pandemic it became very obvious that one very common need experienced by many people is isolation and loneliness. The pandemic is over, but those needs are still very much present with us today.

Many people today feel isolated and lonely. Of all the things we might choose to give, I strongly encourage us to give the gift of our time, the gift of our presence, the gift

of caring, the gift of spending time with someone who feels isolated. Many people need our time far more than they need our money.

One other thing about our readings today. And I know you've heard me say something like this before. I think I say something like this every year - but then we sing the same carols every year too.

[image: ponder]

In our first reading, Mary was approached by the angel Gabriel who told her some news. But let's be honest - the news was not only a surprise to Mary, it was probably not even possible that Mary understood the news. She certainly could not have understood the implications of the news. Gabriel did not give Mary an advance copy of the New Testament after all. Even in the text it says that Mary "was much perplexed by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

[image: Mary - perfect]

In our second reading, however, Mary does not ponder. 10 verses after Mary "was perplexed by the angel's words" Mary sings a song that is complex and deeply theological. She sings a song of clarity. Of certainly. A song of being at peace with what was happening to her. When we read these stories together as we just did I feel like someone flipped over too many pages at once. There must be a piece missing. A part in the story where Mary spent time reflecting on the news and reacting to it. But instead, an angel comes to Mary with news that the spirit will put a seed inside her and she will give birth to the son of God and she basically says, "... and?". She takes it all in stride.

And what are we to do with this image that we have been given of this perfect Mary. The one who understood the incomprehensible. The one who could be calm in the face of chaos and uncertainty. The one who in a time of intense stress wrote the magnificat instead of reaching for a bottle of Prozac like you and I would have done.

I'm sorry to tell you this - but I cannot relate to that Mary. In fact for many of us, that image of a "perfect" Mary is a barrier. It's a barrier to getting down to who the real Mary was. The angel came to Mary and took away her innocence. Then the church came to Mary, and wrote her story in a way that denies Mary her basic humanity, her frailties, her insecurities, her fears. So instead of being given a story about a scared unmarried

teenager dealing with pregnancy - someone we might actually relate to - we have been given a story of the perfect Mary who understood everything and felt truly blessed to be chosen by God for a bizarre assignment. I feel like the real, human Mary is in the story, but she has been buried in it somewhere beyond our sight, buried beneath layers of theological and social expectations.

I do not believe in that perfect Mary. But I do believe in the Mary who was an unmarried, pregnant, 13 or 14 year old girl. I believe in the Mary who was afraid and confused. I believe in the Mary who did not really know that everything would be alright in the end. I believe in the Mary who - just like us - lives with both hopes and fears, strengths and frailties, faith and doubt. I believe in the Mary who - just like us - did not have to be perfect in order to be a blessing to others. I believe in the Mary you will actually meet if you take me up on my idea of looking for the blessings of God among the people experiencing homelessness in our communities.

[image: Thorncliffe park dove]

Now, I've been in ministry long enough to know that very few of you are planning to go spend time with homeless people just because I suggested it. We might want a blessing, but we don't want one that badly, right? I completely understand.

So instead, let's just do it ourselves, right here, right now. Take a moment and speak to a couple of people near you, and offer them a blessing. And feel free to go beyond a short "God bless you". Perhaps ask the other person what blessing they most need to hear and then offer the other person that blessing. Take a few moments right now and offer a blessing to some people right around you. Take your time. If you are on Zoom, feel free to unmute and speak to each other.

[spend time sharing blessings with each other]

[image: Thorncliffe park dove]

Wisdom can come from unexpected places. This week one of my friends - a mathematician and priest- Brian Buydens reminded me of the Grinch, "He puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

Be a blessing to others. That is how God comes into our midst in tangible ways.
That is how we create Advent. Go - and be a blessing.
Amen.