

## Bigger Isn't Better

Advent 4 Dec 23 2018

Oh my gosh, you'd be amazed at what you find online when you Google "bigger is better"! Everything is bigger. Everything is better. Your 4G network! Your blow dryer! Your dishwasher! During this season we are so conditioned to believe that just because a gift is larger, or more expensive, it is better, it is worth more to us, we'll be better people because we have it. However did we manage to get by before? The bigger the gift, the more we are loved.

These advertisers have clearly never watched the Saint Peter's women's group at their Christmas gift exchange. These people have learned by experience and don't automatically gravitate to the biggest boxes. For one thing, they know that they would have to get said large box home in their small car but more importantly, they have divined that the small gift can be more valuable. The smallest most insignificant parcel can hold an exquisite pair of earrings from Dovetail Artisans, for example. That can be stolen from your best friend when your number is called. Or socks. We like socks.

But still, every time we turn on the TV, we are bombarded with messages that condition us to think that life- and love- is a zero sum game like slicing pie. I can only have a bigger piece, a bigger gift, more love if you have less. I have more than you do so I am better than you are. This country can only be mine if I keep you out. Dad likes me better.

When I was idly wandering the internet (Which is the way I pray for the Holy Spirit to come to me with meaning about the readings. Don't judge me) I was struck by a sentence that said simply "Getting a blessing is not the same as getting a present". Let me repeat that. "Getting a blessing is not the same as getting a present".

So think about this reading from Luke. Mary is told that she is blessed, she believes that all future generations will call her blessed and Elizabeth recognizes her as such and from this affirmation Mary draws strength.

Adam Erickson, Education Director for the Raven Project, writes that, although she could have, Elizabeth doesn't get all Grinch-y and jealous of Mary. He says

"Before she sings her song of jubilation in the midst of utter vulnerability, however, Mary visits her relative, Elizabeth, who in her old age has also become pregnant. Both pregnancies are miraculous, but they are not the same. Elizabeth has longed for a child throughout her long life; now that she is finally pregnant, she recognizes the child in Mary's womb, not her own, as her "Lord."

Elizabeth could have been jealous of Mary. She could have refused to believe in the divinity of Mary's pregnancy. She could have said, 'Who does this young hussy think she is? Her baby will not upstage mine!' She doesn't do any of this. She is honored and joyful. She blesses Mary and the fruit of her womb. Again, there is no rivalry – not between the women and not on behalf of their children. Rather, they bond over the shared joy of God's miraculous love working within them".

Mr Erickson describes Mary's Magnificat as her throwdown, her changing of the norms. In her patriarchal society, young, unmarried Mary is assured of her worth and dignity. He continues, saying "After Elizabeth blesses Mary, Mary says, 'My soul magnifies the Lord...' and proceeds to rejoice in God looking with favor on her 'lowliness,' 'scattering the proud,' 'bringing down the powerful,' 'filling the poor and sending the rich away empty', ...invoking equality where once there was hierarchy. This is a subversion of norms, a radical re-orientation of a culture built on keeping some people above others." The Magnificat is a repudiation of our current idea that I can only succeed if you fail.

Mary is indeed blessed. I have often wondered if she considered that a gift. I've talked with you about this before about how hard her path would be, parenting, loving and then losing the human son of God. A blessing is not the same as present.

Saint Nadia asks "Did she feel blessed as her unwed belly grew under the gaze of disapproving others? Did she feel blessed when laboring amongst sheep and straw? Did she feel blessed when her heart dropped realizing she left her 12 year old in Jerusalem? At his arrest did she feel blessed seeing rope dig into the wrists of both God made flesh and the flesh of her flesh? Did she feel blessed when they lifted him up? "Blessed are you among women". But if that's what blessing is, I might have to pass. It was hard enough sending my oldest kid to middle school. Golgatha is a whole other matter."

But, but Mary said yes because "she understood that being blessed means seeing God in the world and trusting that God is at work even in things we can't see, or understand, or imagine."

In the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa wrote "What was achieved in the body of Mary will happen in the soul of everyone who receives the Word." What does that mean for us? For me, at least maybe it means lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and scattering the proud in the thoughts of their heart. Feeling the blessing of trying to do the right thing because it's the right thing.

Settle into your seats, children, and I'll tell you a brief Christmas parable. I have a friend- let's call him Clyde because that's his name- who went to a concert in Philly the other evening. While he was there, he dropped his cellphone and didn't realize it until after he got home. The sound of despair was heard throughout the land. But lo! His wife's phone rang the next morning with glad tidings. His phone had been found. It's a Christmas miracle. That would have been a gift. But the story was really so much more than that. The finder of the phone lives two doors down from me in Doylestown. He has been to Philadelphia only five times in the past twenty five years. He opened the door to his cab and the phone was on the ground in front of him. There are no such things as coincidences; this was, as the Wiccans say, Meant with a capital M. For me, the finding

of the phone, the meeting of the two men and the fact that the finder refused all reward bumped the experience up into a blessing, that blessing of doing the right thing simply because it is the right thing, letting our soul experience the Word that empowered Mary to embrace the feeling of blessedness.

God can create something out of nothing. God can create a miracle. God can recognize the blessedness in every one of us, whether or not we can recognize it.

Nadia says “To be a people marked by the faith of Mary is to be a people, who say Ok, I don’t understand what’s going on and I know that my life isn’t going to end up looking like one I would choose out of a catalogue but I trust that God is at work in all of it. Blessedness is being used for God’s purpose more than it’s getting what I want or things being easy. Christmas itself isn’t about getting what you want, or making sure you’re giving others what they want. To experience Christmas is to trust that God can do this thing again. God can again be born in me, in you, in this broken mess of a gorgeous world.”

We all carry within us the blessing of God and having faith like Mary means allowing ourselves to trust that and to see it in others, all equally worthy. So when someone asks you in the next few days whether you are ready for Christmas, think about Mary, who trusted. God told her that she was worthy and she replied, “I trust that I am who God says I am.” Yes, I’m ready.

Regardless of the size of our presents, even whether we get presents at all, through the Christmas miracle that we await, we will all, all receive the gift of our blessedness.

Amen.