
Be a blessing
Martin Grove United Church
December 16, 2018
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 the only language I know well enough to know how strange it is, is English. For example, have you ever been told to “get your ducks in a row”? The phrase simply means that you need to get organized. Do any of us even own any ducks? And how many ducks would you need in a row? Would you need more ducks - for example - to organize a holiday that you need to organize a trip to a shopping 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. It’s all very confusing!

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. It’s all very confusing!

Have you ever been “mad as a hatter?” I really doubt it. You might think that the phrase comes from “Alice in Wonderland” and that the phrase just means that you are a wonderfully interesting person. But the expression actually comes from 17th century France. At the time, the felt used to make hats contained mercury, and hat makers often suffered from mercury poisoning, which made them appear to be mad. It’s all very confusing!

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, but 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. It’s all very confusing!

And don’t get me started on what ingredients you need to make “toads in holes”. It’s all very confusing!

Not only do many English phrases mean something completely different from

what the words themselves mean, many English phrases - including ones that are used a lot - really 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". You might think that swearing sometimes means "I'm angry", but I put that under the category "I'm afraid of you". This is one reason why older swear words seem so ridiculous to us. "Son of a gun" makes no sense that I can work out. Sometimes swear words are used so that we are "allowed" to use a "bad" word without saying the actual word. I had to look this up, but apparently, 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 television and people had more time on their hands.

But in spite of the fact that swearing sounds like actual communication - particularly if you are on the receiving end - usually it just expresses negative emotions with no other content. 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 other content. Words and phrases that sound like actual communication, but which only give a positive emotion with no other content. Sort of like "reverse swearing". And one of those words is relevant this week, the word "blessing".

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. 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? 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 in a different translation, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour

for us in the house of his servant David. ... Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant”

Sounds familiar, right? But I lied. That was not actually a different translation of what I read earlier, which is often called “Mary’s song” or the “magnificat”. What I just read was a song by Zechariah, the father of John the baptizer . And yet it’s essentially the same text. Both the song of Zechariah and the song of Mary are in Luke Chapter 1 if you want to read them together later.

When you read Zechariah’s song and Mary’s song together, they both speak of blessing. And they are both pretty light on content. They are both simply expressions of positive emotion, emotions like hope, promise, light, love.

And I don’t mean that as an insult. Pick up a newspaper today and you’ll probably find a complete absence of positive emotion, especially hope, promise, light, and love. These things are to be commended and encouraged! Essentially, that’s all that 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.

Since it’s Advent, I would encourage all of us to seek out as many blessings as we can. So where should we start? I would suggest we all start by spendings some time with people who offer blessings very openly. I would suggest we all spend some time with some of the people in Toronto that we label “homeless”. Because I can think of no other demographic of people who are so liberal with their giving out of 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 for it.

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

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 she 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.”

In our second reading, however, Mary does not ponder. 10 verses after she “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 of this perfect Mary - the one who understood the incomprehensible - the one who could be calm in the face of total chaos and uncertainty - the one who in a time of deep stress wrote the magnificat instead of reaching for a bottle of Prozac like you and I would have done. I don’t believe in that perfect Mary.

I do believe in the Mary who was an unwed, pregnant, 14 year old girl. I believe in the Mary who was afraid and confused. I believe in the Mary who did 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 reality. 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 homeless of Toronto.

Now, I’ve been in ministry here long enough to know that none of you are planning to go downtown just to spend time with homeless people. You might want a blessing, but you don’t want one that badly, right? 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 since we actually know each other, feel free to go beyond a short “God bless you”. Feel free to ask the other person what blessing they would like to hear and offer them that blessing. Take a few moments right now and be a blessing to some people right around you. Take your time.

[spend time sharing blessings with each other]

Wisdom can come from unexpected places. This week one of my friends - a mathematician and theologian - 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's how God comes in our midst. That's how we create Advent. Be a blessing.

Amen.