

## Gifts of Women Sunday

### Sermon Draft

No one is more surprised than me to find myself standing at the pulpit. The reason I'm here is that I ticked all the boxes for Gifts of Women Sunday. Although really there were only two boxes.

- I am a woman.
- When asked to fill the pulpit I was told I had a Story to tell. My response was, "Do I?" I was assured that I do, so we'll see.

The scripture for Gifts of Women Sunday is the one we just heard Luke 1: 46-55. This scripture, sometimes referred to as "The Magnificent" or Song of Mary is traditionally read during the Advent Season

We're also familiar with the lead up to Mary's Song of Praise.

Mary, a young woman is visited by Gabriel a messenger from God, saying "Hail, favored one of Israel, the Lord is with you." Mary was understandably worried and afraid. Gabriel, to quell her fears says, "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God because you are about to give birth to the Messiah, the Anointed One.

"How will this be? I'm only engaged. I'm a virgin," said Mary

"The power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you. And the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. And guess what else – your elderly cousin Elizabeth – she is pregnant! With God, nothing is impossible!: said Gabriel

Mary hurried to visit Elizabeth and saw that indeed she was pregnant. Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child in your womb. You are most blessed and believe God’s word to you.”

Mary exploded in a song of happiness, praise of God and the changes the Messiah would bring.

For me this scripture can be divided into 2 parts .

Part 1) Mary BELIEVES what she is told by Gabriel. She accepts God’s message then she exuberantly praises God.

Part 2) While praising God she describes the changes that will come with Christ’s birth and life on earth. God will change the order of things.

I am awed by Mary’s reaction to the news that could have ruined her reputation and cancelled the life she’d planned and expected to have as a young wife. She appears not to worry about what her parents will say, how she might be ostracized by the community, that Joseph, her betrothed, might abandon her. Instead, she embraces this unexpected and monumental change in her life. She recognizes this change does not only affect her; this change will have far reaching consequences – but she does not waiver in her belief and praise of God.

I simply cannot put myself in Mary’s place. How could a very young woman respond with such confidence of belief? How was she able to immediately praise God for turning her life upside down? I couldn’t have done that at 14 or 15, and I’m not confident I could do so now at 68.

I was not raised in a religious faith-based family. I had good parents, but neither belief in God nor religion was a part of their lives.

My Dad was raised Catholic, although I don't think his family was steeped in Catholicism. My grandmother was an immigrant from Ireland, so Catholicism was probably more cultural than religious. When my dad was in high school his mother was diagnosed with leukemia, and she was hospitalized. My dad told me when she was discharged from the hospital, my grandfather thought she'd been cured. So when she soon died at home, this was a shock to both my dad and grandfather. Dad was told to run and get the priest to perform the last rites. Dad came back home with a priest, who, seeing that my grandmother was already dead said, "It's too late. I can't absolve her of her sins." This memory may or may not be an accurate representation of Last Rites in the Catholic Church, but it had a negative effect on my Dad. He basically left the church except for attending mass after the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy.

My mother's story is a little more complicated. My mother's father died when she was quite young – leaving her mother with 3 children to raise; my mother's half-brother Bundy was around 12 years old, my mother was 5, and her brother Charles was 3. The Depression was setting in and although my grandmother was a nurse and could find work, it was difficult with 3 children to care for. Her solution was to leave the two younger children at a Presbyterian Orphanage called Barium Springs in North Carolina. She promised to return soon for her daughter and son, but she didn't. Both my mother and uncle graduated high school from Barium Springs, spending their entire childhoods there.

My Uncle Charles had fond memories of Barium Springs. He thought they both got a good education and were well cared for. My mother did not have such fond memories. In fact, she never talked about this long period of her childhood. My sister and I only knew that they had spent time in an orphanage because my uncle told Carolyn about it, thinking she already knew about Barium Springs. It wasn't until my mother died that we discovered she spent her entire childhood in an orphanage.

My grandmother was a very outspoken Christian. I remember that during her visits she constantly tried to push her beliefs on my parents, and they did not like that. I think my mother felt abandoned and that her mother had lied to her; all the while professing her faith. As I mentioned, Barium Springs was Presbyterian-run and this was not a happy time in my mom's life. I think she linked religion to the broken promises of her mother.

With two parents so divorced from religion how did Carolyn and I end up at St Andrew?

My family lived on Cuervo, across Montgomery Park – which then wasn't a park, but what we called the mesa with an arroyo cut through it. When I was 8 and Carolyn was 6 my mother announced that we would be going to Sunday School at the church across the mesa. I'm sure we asked, "Why?" My mother told us that to understand literature you need to know Shakespeare and the stories in the Bible. With that, we put on our dress clothes and mom drove us to St Andrew in time for Sunday School. She was not staying for church but would pick us up in about an hour.

We were immediately embraced by the women of the church, and indeed we learned the stories of the Bible. I can still remember Zana Prime illustrating stories with the help of her flannel board. Such low-tech graphics are a lost art. Much later, when I was an adult, a Jewish friend asked me how I knew so much about the Old Testament. I said, "I went to Sunday School!"

We stayed on a St Andrew. After a time, a friend of mine, Nancy, started attending Sunday School with me. When Nancy and I were 12 years old, we were baptized here at St Andrew by Rev Harvey in what is now the Activity Room. Nancy and I continued at St Andrew through our teen years going to Sunday School and Youth Group. Gradually as a young adult I transitioned into attending worship services. I didn't question the scriptures or the sermons, but I can't say I had a strong belief either. I had been accepted by the church community, so I simply accepted the messages I was hearing.

I won't go into detail about my whole life – thank goodness I hear you thinking. I **will** tell you that the decade of my 30's was turbulent. I had my third son, divorced, entered into a brief terrible marriage, had my fourth son, divorced (again) was a single mom of four boys, went back to school to become a teacher, met my current husband, and started working as a teacher. I still attended St Andrew and I was bolstered by the community, but I will admit I wasn't spending much time thinking about my spiritual life.

Tom Sanders and I married in 1993. He has two sons for whom he had primary custody. We built a house in the east mountains and became a family of 8. Our lives were centered around the boys' school and sports, our busy careers and the work that goes with living outside the city. Before I knew it, the boys had all graduated high school and were pursuing university studies, working and to my great surprise JOINING THE MILITARY. At one point I had three sons in the military: James and John in the Army and Phil in the Navy.

And then there was the 9/11 attack in 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan and I entered a decade of worry and doubt.

From 2003 to 2012 James was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan six times. John was stationed in Italy, but from there was deployed twice to Afghanistan.

On December 7, 2007, during his fourth deployment James was shot during a fire fight in Taliban-held territory in a remote area of Afghanistan. A bullet tore through his right forearm and bicep. He was stabilized in Afghanistan and flown to Landstuhl Hospital, near Ramstein Air Base in Germany, then to Walter Reed and finally to the hospital at Fort Bragg, NC - his home base. I flew out to NC once he was there. It was comforting to see him, but at the same time he was in excruciating pain, and we didn't know how extensive the damage to his arm would be.

I stayed about a week and then flew back home. I cried the entire flight back to NM and remained in a fog of worry for quite awhile. During this time I heard a song “When It Don’t Come Easy” by Patty Griffin. I became obsessed with this song, particularly these words:

**“You're out there walking down a highway  
And all of the signs got blown away  
Sometimes you wonder if you're walking in the wrong  
direction**

**But if you break down  
I'll drive out and find you  
If you forget my love  
I'll try to remind you  
And stay by you when it don't come easy”**

I was haunted by the fact I couldn’t do anything to help James. I would have nightmares of trying to get to him during a fire fight in Afghanistan!

“I’ll drive out and find you.”

Finally, finally, I heard the song in a different light. It came to me that God would be there. God would be there for my son, the soldier fighting his way through the terror of battle. God would be there for me. We don’t always know the outcome. James could have died that day, but he didn’t. But either way God would have been there.

James’ last deployment was in 2012. That deployment ended when he got hit with shrapnel from an RPG that pierced his lung. A medic saved his life. God was there. James was finally sent home for good. Again, I went out to Fort Bragg to see him. I was not calm – he actually came closer to death with that injury - but it was easier this time, I truly believed that God was with us.

I have stumbled many times in my journey to faith. It has not come easy. But my faith has been strengthened with difficult life experiences:

Tom Sanders has battled cancer and the resulting onslaught to his body since 2010.

My son Andy had a brain tumor in 2017, that turned out to be benign, but still required surgery at MD Anderson. Two years later his wife, my beloved daughter-in-law was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. She underwent surgery, radiation and devastating chemotherapy. She survived, though her battle continues.

I have been terrified in the wake of these life-threatening situations, but this congregation has held me up. Even while in South Carolina, where Tom had his second cancer surgery, we would receive cards of hope every week. And I knew the prayer warriors were waging battle with us. God has been merciful, giving me the gift of “almost.” The worst almost happened, but didn’t. I was given insight to the strength God gives me in the worst of times.

So that is my story. I’ve had a life of great blessings, interwoven with moments of despair and terror – pretty much like every human being.

Let's get back to Mary, Mother of Jesus. Mary was Jesus' lifelong example of humanity. Mary loved Jesus before he was born, she loved him as a young child, she loved him at age 12 in the temple as he amazed everyone with wisdom beyond his years. She even loved him when Jesus told the crowds that Mary and her sons were not his true family. His true family were those who did the will of God. (Although in my mind Mary certainly had done the will of God.) And she loved Jesus at the foot of the cross, when she suffered the unbearable pain of watching her son suffer and die. We know of these incidents from stories in the Bible. But we also know that she was a woman in a time and place that didn't really value women's contributions.

For me, this is why we celebrate Gifts of Women Sunday, to recognize that women have always been capable of being keepers of the faith and leaders in the church.

It's traditional that the names of Ruth, Esther, the sisters Mary and Martha, and Mary the mother of Jesus are brought forward on Gifts of Women Sunday. But in all honesty none of these women get the same respect and devotion as the Kings, the Prophets and the Disciples – in other words the men in the Bible. But we know that women were capable even at a time when they couldn't be recognized.

In the Presbyterian Church USA the Book of Order allowed for ordination of women to elders the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However it wasn't until 1956 that the first woman was ordained as an elder. Nine years later in 1965, the Presbyterian Church USA ordained Rachel Henderlite as its first female pastor. For my entire life, and my time in the Presbyterian Church I have not experienced a church that didn't ordain women to leadership positions. And I celebrate that.

But that doesn't mean there still isn't work to be done. As I was preparing this message a headline popped up on my phone "Southern Baptists Boot Saddleback Church Over Female Pastor." Saddleback Church, a huge church founded by Rick Warren, was affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. But not anymore. Because the church had a female functioning in the office of pastor, the Saddleback megachurch was ousted from the Southern Baptist Convention along with four other churches that had a woman serving as a lead or senior pastor. Even today the Catholic Church, the Church of Latter Day Saints, and the Orthodox Church join the Southern Baptists as rejecting women in lead pastoral positions.

We know there are many places in the world where it is simply life-threatening to be a woman. Afghanistan, Syria, and many countries in Africa top that list. The United States is middling in terms of equality for women. Let us celebrate the wisdom of utilizing the talents of all our members, and work towards creating a world where men and women stand on equal ground.

On this Gifts of Women Sunday I'll leave you with a quote from Abigail Adams in a letter to her husband John Adams in March 1776: "remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."