

**Ho to Receive a Gift from God—Luke 1: 26-38**  
*(December 23, 2018-4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent)*

The saying goes. “’Tis more blessed to give than to receive.” There is great truth in that, but there is also something to be said for being a gracious gift recipient. I think we are losing that art. The trend over the years has been to lessen the surprise of gift giving; kids make lists, stores now have registries for all kinds of occasions, not just weddings. There are also websites that allow you to create a gift registry with links that will take you right to the site where you can buy the gift. Not to judge such things, they can be very helpful not only to the recipient but to the giver as well. As with any trend or innovation, it’s a question of what is gained and what is lost. I would say that what we gain in control and functionality we lose in openness, surprise and wonder. Gift giving at its best involves a thoughtful and generous giver, but also a gracious and open recipient who is willing to let go of their wants and open their hearts to the giver. It’s a spiritual lesson as well.

The spiritual task of the Advent season is to stay open to receive what God sets before us. Christian scholar Esther de Waal says the Christian life depends not on what we can achieve but on what we are willing to receive.<sup>1</sup> Receiving means staying open, staying open means letting go of things we hold precious, such as plans, agendas, power, privilege and status. The life of faith is one defined by openness, where we hold our agendas loosely, ready to receive God’s call not as an intrusion or a threat to our tightly controlled lives but graciously as a gift. That’s not easy.

It wasn’t an easy message for Luke’s audience to hear. Remember that Luke and all the gospels (stories of Jesus) were written in and around the time of the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans, which included the destruction of the Jewish temple, the very centre of Jewish life. Synagogues as centres of Jewish life only really emerged after the temple was destroyed. A parallel for the temple today might be what the Vatican means to Roman Catholics and what Mecca means to Muslims. In the midst of this crisis, as established institutions crumble and the very future of Judaism is in question Luke says watch, stay open, God is doing something new in Jesus. The messiah is not a king with armies. The messiah is the child of a peasant girl from an out of the way village, born into poverty and oppression.

Luke is intentional about assuring his audience that indeed God is doing something new just as God always has. God’s saving work with Israel is continuing but in a new way. Mary’s story is full of allusions to the story of God’s relationship with Israel in the Old Testament. There is the fulfillment of the promise of a saviour born from the lineage of King David (2 Samuel 7: 12-17), there is promise of his kingdom being without end (Isaiah 9: 7, Daniel 7: 14), there is the image of God as presence that overshadows Mary (Exodus 16: 10, 24: 15-18, 40: 34-35) and finally there are the similarities between Mary’s

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<sup>1</sup> Esther de Waal, *Living With Contradiction*.

encounter with God and those of Sarah (Genesis 18: 14) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1: 11).<sup>2</sup> God has not abandoned Luke's community, the story continues but in a new way.

I think that's a timely message for us. We know about tumult. Our world is barely recognizable from what it was even fifty years ago. The church that was once at the centre of society is now marginal. Technology has altered our sense of time and space bringing us closer together for better and worse. Thousands of years of norms around gender roles are changing. Our whole concept of gender is changing. Power is shifting as marginalized groups demand justice with all the backlash that has created. Of course climate change which has been a focus this Advent season is fundamentally altering our planet and forcing us to take a long look at the foundations of our economy and our everyday habits. How are people of faith to be in the midst of all this?

Mary's story shows us a way forward in the midst of this tumult, not an easy way, but a faithful way. That way is to stop defending, stop holding onto life as we know it in favour of the possibilities that God sets before us. It was a message that the community for which Luke was writing needed to hear. The message is a combination of assurance and challenge, God has not abandoned them. The God of Jesus is the God of your ancestors. So look for what God is doing in the midst of the tumult. But, you can only see what God is doing if you stop defending what you know and have and open yourself up to new possibilities. It's hard to receive God's call as a gift when we only see what we're going to lose by being faithful.

That's why it's often so hard for us who are relatively privileged in this world to receive God's call as a gift. We have so much to defend—wealth, power, and status. Faced with the call to greater faithfulness all we see is loss. In some ways it was easier for Mary to receive God's call as gift and grace. Not in all ways of course, socially and culturally she put a lot on the line with her "yes" to God. But, politically and economically it was all gain. Living in poverty and in the insecurity of foreign domination what did she have to lose?

That's why we often most clearly hear God's call from those on the margins, those who have nothing to defend in terms of power, wealth and status. They are the most open to grace, they are the most likely to see God's call not as loss but gain. This past week we heard from another teenage girl who is a carrier for God's vision. Greta Thunberg, a fifteen year old climate activist from Sweden, addressed the international meeting on climate change this week in Poland. She said this to the gathered leaders,

"You are not mature enough to tell it like is...But I don't care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet. Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few. The year 2078, I will celebrate my 75th

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<sup>2</sup> From the footnotes in the *Oxford Study Bible*.

birthday. If I have children maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act...Until you start focusing on what needs to be done rather than what is politically possible, there is no hope. We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis....And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, maybe we should change the system itself.”<sup>3</sup>

What a gift, what grace her words are to those who will stop defending what they have, to those who are willing to let go of privilege, to those who see beyond loss to the possibilities of what can yet be.

Luke's story was a way of saying to his people that they weren't going to be saved by power and might, by holding on to what they knew as a defence against turmoil. Salvation lies in letting go of control and surrendering to the unexpected ways of God. Ways that are always rooted in love. It is the promise of God come amongst us this fourth Sunday of Advent. Our Advent journey continues—we're almost there.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/16/world/greta-thunberg-cop24/index.html>