

EMBODYING THE PROMISE
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January 10, 2010
Baptism of Lord Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

This sermon was originally intended for Dec. 20 but it got snowed out. As it turns out it is still quite fitting on this Sunday when we commission deacons, an office of the church that embodies the calling and promise of the church to bless the world.

Luke 1:46-55 (4th Sunday in Advent)

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (Baptism of Lord Sunday)

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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Mary said YES and gave birth to the light of the world. It didn't just happen. Mary had been baptized in and nurtured by prayer and scripture in the Jewish tradition of her people not unlike the way we are baptized and nurtured in our Christian tradition. Neither Mary nor her son swallowed their tradition whole. Nor should we. Beware: some portions of our tradition are toxic and should be discarded.

It's one thing for Mary to say YES to the promise; it's something else for us to say YES. After all, we don't live under the heel of an empire. We live in its belly. We are not poor,

hungry, oppressed and marginalized, at least not the way Mary and her people were. We are rich, fat, privileged and powerful which is another form of oppression and bondage.

We are rich, fat, privileged and powerful. But then it's not *what* we have but *how* we get it and how we live with it. Not what but how. Of course, that's easier said than done and it's so easy to deceive ourselves, thinking we are more righteous than we are. We must examine our hearts daily and seek the guidance of a trusted, spiritual friend or community.

It's one thing for Mary to say YES. It's something else for us to say YES.

No, we can't change the whole world. After all it's beset by enormous, intractable problems. But we can do our part to mend creation one person, one deed at a time. No act of love is wasted in the evolving web of life.

Mary wasn't much by the world's standards. But she was willing. She made room in her life for the holy. She surrendered her body to divine love and bravely nursed an ancient promise of hope against all odds.

God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

That same holy promise is within our tradition, within you and within this congregation. My heart leaps each time I see it kick in the womb or come to birth.

We don't have to do great things. It's enough to do small things with great love. I've seen those things.

I've seen the way you walk beside those who trudge through the valley of the shadow of death. The way you invite to your holiday table those who would otherwise be alone. The way you welcome and embrace those whom our society and other churches often scorn and reject.

We don't have to do great things. It's enough to do small things with great love.

I've seen and heard the way you prune your closets of excess clothing and shoes during the Advent season and give them to the Rescue Mission, the way our senior youth thoughtfully and prayerfully shop for Christmas gifts for struggling families in this county, the way they spend a week rebuilding a porch, fixing a roof, or painting a house in Mingo County or on an Indian reservation in Arizona. I heard about our junior youth spending an afternoon doing menial chores for the frail and elderly in this parish and about two of our youth shoveling an entire driveway for bereaved members of our parish following the last major snow storm.

I know the way you carry meals to stricken families, the way you transport those unable to transport themselves, the way you build a ramp at a member's house to make the way in less difficult and the way you took in a refugee and created a safe place and promising future for her and her son in 1985.

We don't have to do great things. It's enough to do small things with great love. No act of love is wasted in the evolving web of life.

I've seen the way our women knit prayer shawls for those going through difficult times. The way our men rally around a father who recently lost his job. The way you bring food for JCCM and for the Hispanic migrant community in the Martinsburg. The way you volunteer to teach English as a second language. The way you spend a weekend with the homeless in a soup kitchen in Washington DC or lend a helping hand to Meals on Wheels, the Shenandoah Women's Center and the animal shelter. The way you help disadvantaged young people become the first in their family to go to college. The way you stand as witnesses for peace in marches and demonstrations in Washington.

No act of love is wasted in the evolving web of life.

I've seen the way you reach deep into your wallets to lend financial aid to persons and

communities in distress, like our sister church in Ethiopia or our distant neighbors in Bluefield, Nicaragua still recovering from Hurricane Ida. The way you give hard earned money to support the teaching, preaching, counseling, and hospitality ministry of this church. The way you create and offer artwork for exhibit in the Fellowship Hall. The way you make available a beautiful and soothing worship space and meeting rooms for any and all so persons are comforted and inspired to do small things with great love. I've seen the way you prepare a lesson, practice an anthem or a musical piece, a reading or prayer to bring inspiration to our services of prayer. The way you attend to the children in the nursery and in the Sunday school classes. The way you kneel down to look in the eyes of a child wandering round the Fellowship Hall. The way you prepare meals for college students and middle school youth.

We don't have to do great things. It's enough to do small things with great love.

But there's even more. It's the way you perform your day jobs with more grace, creativity, joy, and attention than is required by your job description. It's the way you speak kindly to your neighbors.

I'm not saying that we do this better than other churches. That's not the point. We're not competing or comparing except with ourselves. I'm not saying we're growing in love by leaps and bounds. But if you look closely you can see small growth rings at the heart of this congregation, multiplying inch by inch over the years, the way an embryo grows into a baby, the way a baby grows into a child, the way a child grows into an adult. A little more kindness, compassion, righteousness and courage this year than the year before and the year before that. The promise grows in the heart of the humble, in those who surrender to Love. Renewing our "baptism into love" daily is the way to go and grow.

Yes, the world can be a gloomy and dark place. Yes, it's easy to wallow in despair. But there's more to the world than gloom. If you pay attention you will hear an invitation

each and every day to give birth to love already implanted in your soul. We don't create it. It's a gift. But we can bear it faithfully as Mary bore the blessed Jesus into the world by simply saying: Let it be. Here I am.