

In 1964, Marshal McLuhan published his monumental work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Because of the influence of his book and his ideas, McLuhan is often considered to be the first father and leading prophet of the electronic age. He worked his entire life trying to understand the effects of technology as it relates to popular culture. Many people still study his works because he was a very serious scholar. But he will forever be remembered primarily as the person who coined two enduring phrases. The first phrase was “global village.” And the second was, “The medium is the message” (Todd Kappelman).

Today I want to move a step or two away from McLuhan’s phrase, “The medium is the message” and suggest to you that at Christmas “the mess is the message.”* Perhaps some of you have pot holders or plaques hanging on your wall that say, “God bless this mess.” I think our Scripture for today tells us that God does bless us amid the mess of this world. God blessed Mary in a messy time of her life, and yet she might well have called it “a magnificent mess.”

We can all identify with the idea of the mess, can’t we? And Christmas is in many ways “the messiest time of the year.” We often work hard to prepare our homes for family or other guests to step through our front door for a party or a meal, or some sort of holiday gathering. Afterwards, there’s always a big mess to clean up. And sometimes it’s a mess getting everything ready. And to add to that, everybody’s packed schedules can often create a mess of activities.

Christmas is more times than not the most hectic, harried, and haphazard time of the year. Isn’t it? Sometimes we find it hard to believe that God can bless this chaotic and congested time. But it was in just such a time as this that Jesus came in the first place. And we can learn from Mary how to make the mess we’ve got magnificent.

Elizabeth was the first one in our story to redeem the mess. She had wanted a child all of her life, but felt left out and lonely because God had not blessed her with children. But now in her old age she has become pregnant. And just as she has this life-changing experience, her husband has become suddenly deaf. What a mess! Apparently, she was a bit embarrassed by a pregnancy at her age, because the Bible indicates that she had been in seclusion for five months when Mary arrived (Luke 1:24).

We can only imagine the thoughts of Elizabeth. We can hardly imagine her feelings of both joy and anxiety. At last she would have a child to care for. But how could she adequately care for this child in her old age? What would happen to this child if something happened to her? Motherhood is an exhausting, never-ending task. Young women struggle to keep up with the demands of parenting. Could she do it at her age? How would she manage? Was she up to it? Her anxiety must have been running high with the mess she was in.

If Elizabeth was in a mess, imagine the mess that Mary was in. Her mental state must have been even more jumbled. She, too, was unexpectantly pregnant. Joseph was understandably confused, conflicted and upset with Mary. None of this had gone according to plan or even according to reasonable expectations. Mary had been looking forward to marriage and the chance to set up a household with Joseph, and then maybe look forward to a baby. But now, everything was happening at once. Mary also had to cope with

those strange visits from angels, and the stunning news about the identity of this baby. It was an insane time of her life. Events and emotions were swirling around her in a cloud of confusion. It was a real mess!

Yet in the midst of the mess of life for both women, they each responded with incredible faith. They opened themselves to the unexpected presence of God in the middle of all the mess. The result is a poetic outpouring of praise to God. Mary's song of praise has become one of the most enduring and endearing poems of all time. Today's reading picks up the story where Mary has set out on a journey to visit Elizabeth in the hill country. Everything about this meeting is unusual. It was unusual for such a young woman to make an un-chaperoned visit to her kin, Elizabeth. The Bible indicates that they were family, but it does not state the exact degree of that relationship.

Mary speaks to Elizabeth first, but the Bible does not record what her greeting was. Elizabeth is immediately filled with the Holy Spirit and the child within her leaped. The first words from Elizabeth's mouth are these: *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"*

In a culture where women seldom played public roles, it is unusual that we find such heavy theological statements coming from a woman. Following right in her footsteps with a profoundly theological song that has come to be known as "The Magnificat," Mary's song begins this way: *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,"* So God takes a simple, humble, young woman and looks with favor on her, transforming and exalting her. These women had found magnificent faith in the midst of the messiness of life. How did they do it? What can we find as their secret to make the mess magnificent?

Perhaps one of the secrets of the faithful lives of both these women is that amid the mess of life, they looked to God. They asked, **"What is God saying to me in this mess?"** And so should we. Elizabeth heard God telling her that Mary was to be the mother of the Lord. She knew this was no ordinary visit from a relative. This was the in-breaking of the long-expected kingdom of God. And Mary sensed the profound impact of her pregnancy. She knew that God had looked with favor on her. And she knew that this child would mean that God would bring down the rulers from their thrones, and lift up the humble (v. 52). And she knew that all of this was *"just as [God] promised to [her] ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever"* (Luke 1:55).

God spoke to these women in the middle of a huge mess. I suspect that God is speaking to us as well, but we are not listening very well. In the last twenty years, I have heard more and more friends in the Presbyterian Church speaking of something called "spiritual direction." I think it originated in the Catholic tradition, but today people of all denominations are getting into it. Ministers find someone specially trained in the field and spend time regularly with their spiritual director, who serves as a kind of mentor for their spiritual lives. One of my friends says that his spiritual director seems to continually ask the question, **"What is God saying to you in this?"** Whatever he brings to the spiritual director, he seems to always get the same question directed at him. Most of the time, we complain about the mess we are in, we strategize about how to get out of the mess, or we at least try to find techniques to cope with the

mess. But the spiritual director focuses again and again on that profound question, **“What is God saying to us in this mess?”**

Perhaps we can ask ourselves that question just now regarding whatever the particular mess of our life looks like. What is God saying to me in this mess? Both Elizabeth and Mary heard loud and clear the voice of God in their messy lives. We can too if we only listen.

The next thing Mary did was to dedicate her life to God. In his book *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Philip Yancey tells about a surgeon friend of his who performs delicate surgery to rebuild the human hand after a severe injury. Whenever he gets a call that there has been an accident, the doctor knows that he will be staring into a microscope and doing delicate surgery for over six hours. And this can happen at all hours of the day or night. On one occasion, he was called at 3 o'clock in the morning. He was worried about being able to concentrate enough during the surgery so he hit upon a novel approach that helped him. He called his father even though he was waking him up at 3 AM, and told his dad that he was going to dedicate this surgery to him.

Then during the six hours of surgery, he imagined that his dad was there with him encouraging him and even putting his hand on the doctor's shoulder during the surgery. The doctor reported that this technique was so successful that he decided to dedicate all his surgeries to someone. So for a while, he would call a friend or a relative and tell them that he was about to enter surgery and that this imminent surgery was dedicated to them. But finally, he hit upon the idea of dedicating the surgery to God. And he reported that it was amazing the power in such a dedication. He could sense that God was with him. For this doctor, it was a specific way of living for God.

We should do the same thing. We should live our lives with the sense that we are dedicating every day, every moment to God. We should sense God's presence with us and even God's hand on our shoulder. One of the best ways to do that is to practice the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. One of our adult classes has been studying spiritual disciplines this fall.

Perhaps for most of us attending church is our only discipline, but today, I want to ask you to make a commitment to reading the Bible and praying. This isn't a New Year's resolution, just a challenge to every member of our church to a new level of spiritual discipline. I'm suggesting a daily quiet time. A quiet time is a short period of time for Bible reading and prayer, which in my mind always go hand in hand. And even though Pastor Bob and a small group just finished a year-long plan called *One Year Bible* I'm challenging you to read through the Bible in 2019!

Experts say if you really want to make yourself do something, tell someone else your plans. A public commitment is simply a way of making ourselves accountable to one another. It should never be a guilt trip for those who fail. But it's a way of encouraging one another to stick to the task at hand.

2019 will be a great year of spiritual growth if we take steps to improve our spiritual health. Amid all the messiness of life, we can hear a word from God if we open his Word and pray every day. Remember that Jesus was born in a stable, and take it from a kid who grew up on a farm, a stable is a very messy place. This new baby was out of place amid the straw, the spilled grain, and all the smells and sounds of the stable. It was a mess!

But the mess is the message of Christmas. There is no stable, no place in our world that is too remote or too messy that God cannot be found there—when we look for him. Amen.

*These ideas are from a sermon by Dr. Mickey Anders.