

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

December 1, 2024

**WORDS for the  
BEGINNING:  
You Are a Blessing**  
Dr. Jo Forrest



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## WORDS for the BEGINNING: You Are a Blessing

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Advent is a season of beginnings *and* endings. It reaches into our ancient faith history to recall the promises made by God to bless us and to redeem us. It picks us the oldest of all drumbeats of God blessing Abraham at the very beginning so that he becomes a blessing to future generations.

Advent also signifies endings. It tells us to put aside any fear that God simply does not care about our common lives. It squashes our anxiety if we are good enough.

Even though Advent anticipates joy, we start by shining a light on the brokenness of our lives and our world. How else can we end those habits and beliefs that tie us to a past or bind us to someone else's ideas of what or who we are? We no longer confine ourselves and one another a story that drains us of life. We put an end to all that so we can hear God's blessings.

Our sermon series, *Words for the Beginning* explores these endings and beginnings.

We will visit familiar stories of unlikely people who hear God's promise and muster the courage to claim their belovedness by God and make a new beginning.

Today's reading takes us to a time when the Israelite people languish in exile, enslaved by the Babylonians.

Isaiah speaks on behalf of God to a people who are confused, who suffer from disrupted lives. And, they suffer from a disrupted understanding of themselves and God.

The old prophet harangues them for chapters of their failure to respect one another, to live decently, and for forgetting their side of the covenant with God. Then, just at the moment we want to cry, "enough!", he turns and speaks the words they need to hear.

*Holy God,*

*The words of this world whip around us like a mighty wind.*

*We are caught up in news reports,*

*pushed down by the constant hum of it all.*

*But here on this bright morning we remember: you too are speaking.*

*Still the voices around us.*

*so that we can hear your words above the wind.*

*We begin again.*

*Speak to us, as only you can. Amen.*

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight

and honored and I love you,

I give people in return for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

<sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;

<sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, “Give them up,”  
and to the south, “Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—

<sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.”

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One of the acclaimed novels published this year is *James* by Percival Everett. Some call this novel a reimagining of Mark Twain’s classic, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* since the story unfolds along the Mississippi River with Huck Finn and his companion, Jim, an enslaved runaway.

Critics and Everett himself reject the notion this novel merely *reimagines* Twain’s work since this story turns on Jim’s agency, intelligence, and compassion.



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Like the original, they face their share of life-threatening adventures in the swift waters and fires while Jim flees from lynch mobs.

The story begins while Jim remains enslaved. In the quiet of night. He educates himself in his master's study, risking his life to learn to read and write.

He devours enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire and John Locke and their theories on human agency and identity.

Once escaped, Jim pulls a stolen pencil from his pocket, scratches an alphabet for the first time, then writes his own words for the first time:

I am called Jim. I have yet to choose a name....in the religious teachings of my captors I am a victim of the Curse of Ham...I will not let this condition define me. I will not let myself, my mind drown in fear and outrage...my interest is in how these writings have meaning, then life can have meaning, then I can have meaning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Percival Everett, *James* (New York: Doubleday, 2024), p 55.

This man claims for himself not the Curse of Ham or the fabricated notions, even from esteemed enlightenment philosophers that justified enslaving him to another human being. He claims freedom. He claims the blessing to be alive. As his adventures unfold with Huck Finn, we encounter a man thoroughly committed to those whom he loves. He risks his life for the dignity of another human. All the while pursuing a life redeemed from bondage.

A central theme is identity: the identity given to us by others, versus the identity we claim as our own. The novel examines the dehumanizing effects of slavery and the pervasive, racism that underpins it.

Everett's novel resonates today from the ongoing systemic injustices from those long-ago sins. In time, I imagine this work will take its place among the classics of American literature.

After months in flight, becoming enslaved again, starved, and always moving forward, this man called "Jim" pulls out his precious pencil and writes:

My name is James. I wish I could tell my story with a *sense of history* as much as *industry*. I was sold when I was born and then sold again. My mother's family was from someplace in on the continent of Africa, I had been told or perhaps simply assumed. I cannot claim to any knowledge of that world or those people, whether my people were kings or beggars....I can tell you that I am a man who is cognizant of his world, a man who has a family, who loves a family, who has been torn from his family, a man who can read and write, a man who will not let his story be self-related, but self-written.

*(James, 93)*

Despite this self-knowledge, his would-be captors continue to hound him with his old name and all the pejoratives to diminish him. Despite the ways others speak of his cursedness, he lives into his blessedness.

James shoulders the responsibility to be what he imagines. By this courage, he sets a course to freedom for others. At the end, and I'll not spoil it, when he's asked his name, he replies, "I am James." He rejects any labels from the past. He silences

other questions about some man called “Jim, with, I am James, “just James.” (*James*, 303)

James’ story sounds like the story written of our faith.

Those who enslaved the Israelites likely labeled them as less-than human or undeserving freedom, calling them names that stung, with an intention to humiliate them.

Isaiah speaks to them with God’s voice. Using soothing language, they hear God say, “I have called you by name, you are mine.” God promises to be with them.

God reminds them of their original blessedness, created in God’s own image, and declares they are “precious in my sight.” God repeats the divine decree laced throughout scripture, “Do not fear, for I am with you.”

Eight hundred years later, that’s exactly what a young woman in Nazareth hears an angel say, “Do not fear.” No one suspects the world to change though the life of a woman – someone never of equal standing to a man – who comes from a place that never produces anyone of value.

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The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary hears God call her by name. She learns, despite what others claim, she is made in God's own image and for God's "glory" just as prophesied. She too claims her blessing. She risks everything and charts a new beginning for humanity.

The more we yearn to be seen and known by God and others, the more we are able to comprehend the significance of these messages from both Isaiah and Luke. Consider how we see this evident today.

A new student looks out at a sea of strange faces in the cafeteria, wondering where he should sit. He dresses differently. He looks different. Will others make a place for him?

A younger woman drives to her hometown after years away hoping to leave behind some stories she'd rather not tell. She's been judged and paid the penalty. Will those at home hold this against her?

An employee finally scores the promotion earned long ago by their performance, but still struggles with those

unwilling to see their potential. How does their voice get heard?

We often fear the labels we receive from our peers, in our workplace or families. Or, worse yet, we let others define us.

What we need, according to the prophet Isaiah, is to hear how God gives us identity and value. We belong from the one who claims us and never lets us go. That's where we always begin.

God calls you by name. It may take shouts or whispers over time for you to hear it over the cacophony of what others say you are. But, when you hear, your bones begin to stir with the blessing you've always carried. This blessing gives you divine agency to be what God desires...and you discover that is exactly what you desire.

This blessing also animates the world by the way you bless others by what you will do. You begin to do what is necessary, even if others believe it impossible.





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