

“Nothing is Impossible with God”

Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 1: 26-38

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It is a peculiar thing, this coming of God. It takes us all by surprise even when we know it is coming. After all, we know the story. We are not surprised and perplexed like Mary was when she heard the news. We know the whole story, cover to cover, start to finish. Yet, somehow each time we hear it, we are touched in a different way. It is like your favorite song, the one that makes you cry every time you hear it. You know the words, you know it is coming, and then somehow, you are surprised when on cue those tears start rolling down your face. How does Mary’s story speak to you this Advent season?

I am so glad that Dick chose this scripture for today. It is not part of this year’s lectionary readings. Today we would be hearing about vipers broods, but instead we get Mary. However, for those of you who might not be with us next Sunday for our marathon of Christmas Eve services, this is your chance to hear Mary’s side of the story, from the very beginning. Christmas Sunday would seem rather odd if we did not hear from Mary. After all, there would be no Jesus and no Christmas without Mary. How amazing it is that this young woman, no older than a teenager, would be the one God chose to change the world.

Imagine her horror and surprise when she received the news. What are you talking about, angel, calling me “favored one.” Who me?! You must have the wrong person, Gabriel. God would never choose me. How often have you heard those words come out of your own mouth? God would never choose me. I imagine there is more than one of us here who has thought if not said aloud those very words. God would never choose me. And why is that? What makes you less worthy to carry out the will of God? Well, this is precisely how Mary felt. She couldn’t believe what the angel was telling her because she could not accept her own worthiness. Say it isn’t so. But it was so. The angel said so.

It didn’t take Mary very long to move from disbelief to belief. I know for sure that I would have taken much longer to get to the place of acceptance. How amazing it is that she ponders this news for such a short while and then tells the angel to count her in. She will do whatever it is that God asks of

her. She didn't sleep on it or call her best friend or insist that she run this past her mother or even better her fiancée. She just accepts this incredible invitation and then waits to see what will happen next. After all, there is nothing to fear. The angel has promised that nothing shall be impossible with God.

I believe there is a difference between “all things are possible,” and “nothing shall be impossible.” The angel did not say all things are *possible*, but that nothing shall be impossible with God. Many of us think in the language of impossibility. We think, I couldn't possibly do that. However, the angel promises not only Mary, but all that believe that nothing shall be impossible with God. Things may seem impossible when I try to do them alone, but nothing is impossible *with God*. The way may seem impossible to travel when I try to make the journey alone, but nothing is impossible *with God*. How easy it is to forget this. How easy it is to shut others out and see only darkness instead of the light, however dim, that will lead us where we need to go.

Mary is such a powerful witness. She is considered by some to be the first disciple, the ultimate role model of faith. Did the story happen as we hear it today? We don't know. Did she really agree so quickly and did the angel come upon her and allow her to conceive? One of my very favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “a story doesn't have to be true, to be true.” Mary knew something almost instantly that we sometimes take much longer to discover. Even though she had agreed to do this miraculous thing, she knew that she could not do it alone. She would have to get the courage to tell Joseph what had happened. She would have to tell her family what was happening. As she pondered these things in her heart she heard the angel's promise, “nothing shall be impossible with God.” We all need someone to be that non-anxious, loving presence as we make our way through uncharted territory. Before Mary was able to let others in on her news, she had Elizabeth. What a blessing it was to share the journey with her. Elizabeth, for so long unable to have a child, was also pregnant and would be Mary's faithful companion along this mysterious journey.

Mary had no idea what was happening to her, but she agreed to allow God's will to be done. Let it be to me according to your word. Not according to how she thought it ought to be done, but as God intended for it to be done. After all, if it were up to Mary, none of this would be happening. She would be going about her business, quietly planning her wedding. After all, she was

not ready for any of this. She had not yet married Joseph. She was, as we well know, a virgin. Therefore, it would take a miracle for any of this to happen, and a miracle is precisely what God promised. The Holy One would come into the world in the least expected way. Not as one born to royalty, but to a simple young woman. Not born in luxury, but in a stall behind an Inn too full to accept the Mother of God.

In spite of all the impossible situations you and I have ever faced, I'm thinking the greatest "Impossible!" of all time comes from today's story. It is not difficult for us to identify with Mary's initially incredulous response. God, you must have the wrong person. It can not be me. But God insists that you are the right person, the very person to do God's will. You are the one God needs, the one God has chosen, the one whom God will send, the one to whom God will give courage and strength to do what you thought you were after all, unable to do. Because nothing shall be impossible with God!

The angel does not only speak to Mary in her amazing situation. The angel speaks to each one of us who believe. When the impossible hits in our lives, when that impossible, unexpected, unbelievable thing impacts our lives, when that incredible event breaks our hearts and shatters our dreams, the angel's promise comes to us as well...nothing shall be impossible with God.

Do you believe the angel speaks to you or are those simply words from Mary's story? A few weeks ago several folks shared with us their reflections about hope. I believe this in part, was what they were talking about. When tragedy strikes our lives, when the ground beneath us shifts and threatens to swallow us whole, the promise of the angel rings quietly in our ear, nothing shall be impossible with God. Even when the panic or dread threatens to sweep us away, the angel carries us to safety and reminds us again...nothing shall be impossible with God.

There is a process with three steps that occurs in the gospel story this morning. This process can help us on our own spiritual journeys. We've encountered two of these steps so far. First, the impossible situation is named. This is where most people give up. This is where we throw up our hands in defeat or crash in despair. This is a when we have not yet heard the angel's promise or fail to believe it.

Then, we hear something, from the chaos, there comes a voice reassuring us...nothing shall be impossible with God. First the impossible thing

confronts us and like any normal human being we are frightened, or angry or depressed or any number of other emotions that are a natural part of the this process. However, if we stop and listen for that still small voice within, we hear that unbelievable promise that nothing shall be impossible with God. We may dismiss it at first, wallowing a while in those feelings of despair, however, the angel keeps whispering...nothing shall be impossible with God.

There is more to this process than simply hearing the promise. There is one final step that may be the most important of all. One more thing has to happen. This is not something God does, but something we do. Something Mary did or there would have been no birth of the Christ child. Something we need to do or there will be no birth of Christ within us.

The third step in the process of moving from the impossible to the miraculous is contained in Mary's reaction to this news. Listen carefully to the response that ushered in the incredible miracle of the incarnation. She says, "here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." The key to this story is Mary's belief. It takes a willing spirit to hear the words of God. It takes a believing heart to actually understand this to be Good News.

In the week ahead, as you finish all the hustle and bustling, the wrapping, the baking, the worrying and wondering, perhaps these words will be a special gift to you...nothing shall be impossible with God. Perhaps this year we will like Mary say "here I am the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." Even if this season is particularly difficult or challenging, allow yourself a moment of rest to hear these words again...nothing shall be impossible with God. May it be so! Amen