

“Nothing Will Be Impossible with God”

Based on Luke 1:26-38

Preached on Dec. 20, 2020

Fellow baptized saints, we’ve come to the 4th Sunday in Advent and our readings take a kinder, gentler turn. Gone are the big eschatological texts warning of the approaching last day. Gone too is John the Baptizer, that strange almost creepy, figure appearing in the wilderness, that voice calling us to repentance and to the water of Baptism. We go from the Jordan wilderness to an obscure town in northern Galilee named Nazareth. We go from the desert to a garrison town in the high country, a watchtower over Israel standing guard over the north. And there we meet a young teenage girl, planning her marriage to a man named Joseph.

John the Baptist challenged our religion, our repentance, our whole outlook and world view. But this sweet and humble girl seems to be so opposite to John. So non-threatening, so gentle, the opposite of everything that John has been for us these past two weeks. And yet - Mary is no less challenging – perhaps more. For she challenges our reason and senses. She challenges our skepticism and need for evidence. She challenges everything we know about biology and how babies are conceived. And most of all, she challenges our expectations of how God should work, especially if we were the ones who called the shots and ran the show. So don’t let this humble and faithful young girl fool you. Her faith in the Word is going to challenge you.

It is the “sixth month,” that is, the sixth month of Elizabeth’s very unlikely and unusual pregnancy. Elizabeth and her priestly husband Zechariah are very old, decades beyond childbearing years. And yet, by the Word of God spoken through the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, this couple somehow conceives a son in what amounts to a biological impossibility. This is the sort of thing that would make the front page of the National Enquirer. Elderly couple conceives. Wife Elizabeth is in her sixth month. Mother and child are doing fine. Imagine it, if you are able. A woman who would have been a grandmother or even a great-grandmother being in her last trimester.

For nothing will be impossible with God.

The angel greets her. Angels are polite that way. “Greetings, O favored one, graced by God. The Lord is with you.” Nice! But what does it mean? What does it mean to be “graced” by God, to be favored by Him? Understandably, rightly, Mary is troubled. Wouldn’t you be? It’s not every day you see an angel. I wouldn’t expect to see one in a dozen lifetimes. I’m not that special. Nor are you. Nor really was this Nazarene girl who was busy planning her wedding.

Because to be graced is to be on the receiving end of undeserved kindness. That’s what grace is, undeserved kindness, without any merit or worthiness in me. There is no need to make of Mary any more than she was. No need to make her sinless or to turn her virginity into some sort of credential with God. She is “graced by God,” the recipient of a gift undeserved, an honor unmerited, that fallen daughter of Eve though she is, she is nonetheless chosen by God for this unique dignity. Mary wants to know “what does this mean?” And the angel tells her.

“You have found favor with God,” Gabriel says. She is the object of God’s favor. Undeserved, unmerited. No need to fear. God is good and gracious. And here’s the kicker: “You will conceive in your

womb and bear a son, and you will call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

I’m sure that once she calmed down, Mary heard echoes of the prophet Nathan. She knew her Bible. She knew the promise to David, that a son of David would sit on his throne and establish his kingdom forever. What she just found out was that she, of all the girls in Israel, of all the daughters of Zion, had been chosen by God to be the mother of the Promised One, the Son of David, the Son of God.

Mary’s question is almost funny. She’s just heard that the child that she will conceive is going to be the Son of God, the son of David, and she wants to know, “How exactly is this going to happen since I have not as yet known a man.” You have to love a question like that! She doesn’t doubt it’s going to happen, she doesn’t quibble over the fact that it will be God’s Son. She just wants to know the mechanics - because let’s face it - everyone including this young girl from Nazareth knows that virgins don’t conceive. She may not have known what we know about reproductive biology and genetics and fertility, but she knew what we all know, that virgins do not conceive, and when one does show up pregnant, you and I and everyone else in the world say “Uh huh” and go our doubtful way.

For that matter, if you turn to Matthew to get Joseph’s side of this, you’ll discover that he didn’t believe it either and set the wheels in motion to call off the wedding and free her so she could marry the rightful father of her child. Joseph also knows this very basic fact of life, virgins do not conceive.

But nothing is impossible with God.

And so Gabriel speaks. He offers an explanation, which would have to do given the circumstances, because how exactly do you explain this? “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will shadow over you.” That’s about it. Not much of an explanation, but it will have to do. This is the Spirit’s doing. Just as He hovered over chaos in the beginning of creation, He’ll hover over you Mary – just as He delivers the Word to our ears, and the ears of all believers – He delivers this Promise to Mary, and the Word became flesh in her womb and made His dwelling among us. And there, my friends, is the mystery of Christmas.

The infinite God, the almighty Word, the Word through whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together, takes up residence in the Virgin’s womb and becomes man. The Creator becomes the creature. God becomes Man. The fullness of Deity deigns to dwell in the womb of a human mother. And our humanity in its most basic and helpless form, is embraced by God.

He didn’t have to do it this way. He’s God. He can do the incarnation thing however He wishes. He could have appeared in the wilderness like His cousin John. He could have dropped down from the clouds. He could have magically appeared in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. He could have done this any way He wanted. And what He wanted was to embrace our fallen humanity every single step of the way. Not simply from cradle to grave, but literally from our womb to our tomb. There is nothing of our humanity that is not touched and redeemed by Jesus. He sanctifies the womb, He sanctifies the tomb. He is God with us every step of the way. And though this cuts against every notion we have about how God should work and all that we know about how our biology does work...

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It is said that Mary got pregnant through her ears. It sounds strange, I know, but it's true. She heard the Word and conceived. And here she stands in counterpart to another woman, the first woman Eve. Eve listened to the Lie, and she was deceived. Eve, whose name means "Life," brought Sin and Death and darkness into the world by her hearing. But standing here opposite her is Mary who hears God's Word and conceives the One who is Life and Light and forgiveness and grace and mercy.

In a way, Mary is also a picture of every baptized believer, and so also then of the Church. Beloved, you too are graced by God, a recipient of His undeserved kindness. The Holy Spirit has come upon you in your Baptism, and the power of God working through the Word has shadowed over you there in the waters. And while you don't conceive Christ (that was uniquely Mary's to do), nevertheless Christ takes up residence in and among us. He dwells with us by His Word as we dwell in Him by faith.

And we don't need angels to bring the good news to us. God has appointed pastors to fill that task. And the sign that He gives us to ponder is not some pregnant distant relative who happens to be a senior citizen, but the humble and simple signs of water and Word and bread and wine. That water is a Baptism, a washing away of sin, that simple words spoken by one to another can convey the forgiveness of sins, that bread is the Body of Christ and wine is His Blood - is as marvelous and wonderful and out of the ordinary as an old woman conceiving in her seniority or a young woman conceiving in her virginity.

And what it means for each of us is that we stand justified before God, graced by His undeserved kindness, favoured on account of this Jesus poured and preached and placed into us - so that with Mary, we too may say, "Let it be to me according to your Word." Beloved, we believe this - not because we can measure it, taste it, smell it, sense it, rationalize it, or understand it. We believe this, and will always believe this, for nothing is impossible with God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.