

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 23, 2018

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Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:26-38

Believe

Nothing will be impossible with God. –
Luke 1:37



Annunciation by Kathleen Scarboro

*She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl. –Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures**

"I can't believe that," said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said, in a pitying tone. "Try again. Draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One *can't* believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." ⁱ

I'm sure you recognize that famous dialogue between Alice and the Queen from Lewis Carroll's classic, *Through the Looking Glass*. On the other side of the looking glass Alice found a world turned upside down. Impossible things were happening all around her:

I don't know what time of the day it was -- before or after breakfast -- when the angel Gabriel showed up at Mary's house, in a small town in Galilee called Nazareth. I am quite certain that everything he told her up-ended the world she knew and stretched the limits of her young imagination.

Listen to the story of the announcement of the birth of the Messiah from Luke, chapter 1 beginning at verse 26:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you

will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Saving God, nothing is impossible with you. Nothing is too wonderful. So sharpen our imaginations. Send *us* your Holy Spirit and overshadow *us* with your presence, so that we will not limit your possibilities with small or narrow hopes. Help each one of us to say with Mary, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.

One of the best things about Christmas is surprise. We've all seen the videos, like the one of Maria and Micaela Kemerling. The 19-year-old twins are cheerleaders for the University of Missouri. They were leading the crowd at a Mizzou basketball game last December when their dad, Captain Kody Kemerling, made them jump for joy when he showed up and surprised them at a game after a 10-month deployment in Kuwait. The girls said it was by far the best Christmas present they've ever received!ⁱⁱ

Earlier this month a mom in Derby, Vermont named Julie Gates got quite a surprise. At the Walmart checkout a complete stranger stepped up and payed for her gifts. Then he did the same thing for a bunch of other customers in the store.ⁱⁱⁱ A Walmart spokesperson said it was the first of a string of similar random acts of kindness. Someone secretly paid off \$57,000 in layaway items at a Uniondale, New York Walmart, and another secret Santa shelled out \$29,000 at a Walmart in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.^{iv}

And there you were thinking people are just no darn good. Try believing at least 6 impossible things before lunch today.

Christmas began with an unbelievable surprise -- the announcement that a virgin would conceive, bear a child, and that child would be the Messiah, the Son of God. Astonishing? Incredible? Yes, but then again, God has a history of doing extraordinary things using nothing but ordinary people. Mary was just that, a peasant girl, a Palestinian Jew, little more than a child herself. She had no money, no status, almost certainly no formal education. Contrary to what you might have heard, the Bible doesn't say that she was a person of extraordinary faith or virtue.

What the Bible does say is that she was “favored” by God. The Greek is very close to the word *charis* which means kindness or grace; Mary is not called Kind One or Graceful One. She's

called Favored One. This favor is something she's received. Mary has received God's grace, God's favor.

And she was blessed. Oh my, she was blessed. She was the only person in history who knew Jesus every single day of his earthly life. She carried him for nine months; carried him over rough terrain all the way from Nazareth in the north to the little town of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem in the Judean hills. She gave birth to him there, nursed him; and watched him grow strong. He held her fingers as he took his first tentative steps. She showed him how to use a spoon and drink from a cup; she made sure he had warm clothes for the winter. Maybe she licked her finger and wiped a smudge of dirt off this face. Mothers do.

Yes, Mary was favored by God, graced in a way that all mothers are, *and* in a way no mother has ever been. On the day the angel showed up to greet her, and announce the miracle about to take place, my guess is that she was more surprised than anyone. Gabriel was the angel assigned to that duty. I imagine he was more than a little perplexed himself. She was such an odd choice. Favored girl.

Decades later, when her son tried to explain to Mary this thing he was required by God to do, compelled to do, I wonder if she thought back on those goose-bumpy moments when she was face to face with the angel of the Lord. Nothing Gabriel said then, and none of her prayers since could have prepared her for seeing her son touch a blind man's eyes and restore his sight and make lepers clean. When he called to the fishermen standing by the shore to put down their nets, to "go and fish for people," I wonder if she laughed, surprised by the kind of kingdom he was building – a dominion of regular people, ordinary souls. Was that what Gabriel had meant when he said,

The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

It was an upside down kingdom, for sure, a kingdom where the meek inherit the earth and where the peacemakers, not the powerful and famous, are called the beloved of God.

She followed him quietly throughout his three year ministry – watched him do impossible things nearly every day. She followed him all the way to Jerusalem.

As the terrible, holy events of that week unfolded, she was there when they led him to trial, and the next morning, when fear and patriotism melted into murderous rage and the crowd shouted out, "Crucify him!" She was there. She must have wondered: How is *this* possible?

When nearly all of his other disciples abandoned him, she never did. She stayed while the soldiers nailed his hands and feet to a Roman cross. She refused to leave her son, God's son.

After he was raised, she remained with the ones who heard him say, "Stay in Jerusalem until you receive the power from on high."^v She was there in the Upper Room^{vi} waiting with all the ones who gave the rest of their lives to spreading the Good News: the truth, that with God all things are possible.^{vii}

Mary believed. Children do, you know. Maybe that was God’s plan all along. Belief requires imagination, and young people have plenty! Mary believed that with God anything is possible, or as the Lord asked her ancestor Abraham, “Is there anything too wonderful for God?”^{viii} Clearly the answer is “No. With God anything is possible!” She was not the first, or the last to believe this. Artists, inventors, and innovators all need to believe in the impossible.

I’m old enough to remember Dr. Christiaan Barnard who performed the very first human-to-human heart transplant. Until then everyone thought it was impossible. Not anymore.

Have you ever heard of Jan Paderewski (Yan Pader’-roo-ski?) He was an immensely popular 20th century Polish musician who became Foreign Minister then Prime Minister of that country. When he was young he left Poland to play his first recital in London. Before he left he asked an influential musician in Poland to give him a letter of introduction to some of the musicians in Britain. He had to ask for the letter several times but finally received it in a sealed envelope. As it turned out he didn’t need the letter. Paderewski became a sensation in Britain, then in America. He became a friend of President Woodrow Wilson who was a friend of this church. Years later, going through some old papers, he found the envelope, still sealed. He opened it and read: “This will introduce Jan Paderewski, who plays the piano, for which he demonstrates no conspicuous talent.”^{ix} What if Paderewski had opened that letter? He might not have believed it was possible.

Around the turn of the last century, 1901 or 1902, nearly everyone believed that flight was impossible. “If people were meant to fly, God would have given us wings!” That’s what people said. There were two preacher’s kids who believed it could be done. Bishop Wright’s boys: Orville and Wilber knew it could be done.

Believing, you see, isn’t something you think about, it’s something you do. Believing involves risk; it means putting yourself out there. Believing requires imagination, enough to stretch your mind beyond credulity, or as one of my favorite poets, Howard Thurman, wrote:

There must always remain
In every person’s life
Some place for the singing of angels –
Some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful...
The commonplace is shot through with new glory ...
A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives
We are trying to grow tall enough to wear.
Despite the crassness of life
Despite all the harsh discords...
Life is saved by the singing of angels.^x

Can you let it in? That thing that can’t be managed, measured, or analyzed? Can you let yourself believe – if just for a moment that, “with God nothing will be impossible”?

Will Willimon was the Dean of Duke Chapel. One day a student came to him distressed that he was losing his faith. When Will asked what faith he was losing, he replied, “I have problems with the virgin birth. Do you have to believe in the miraculous birth of Jesus in order to be a Christian?”

Will assured him that you do not; belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, or any other miracle is not required in order to follow him, but “in another sense,” Will said, “yes, you do.” He continued, “We ask you to believe in the virginal conception of Jesus, and, if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there’s no telling what else we can get you to believe. Come back next week and we will try and convince you that the poor are royalty and that the rich are in big trouble, that God, not presidents and kings, rules the world, and on and on. We start you out with something small like the virgin birth, then work you up to even more outrageous assertions.”^{xi}

Some of this (Bible) requires a good bit of imagination. Six impossible things before lunch, things like “Whoever wants to be great must become a servant,”^{xii} and, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”^{xiii} “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”^{xiv} Believing God came to the world in the womb of a virgin named Mary is easy compared to those. But we try. It is one of the reasons we’ve come today, because we want to make room for the singing of angels.

Maybe you are like the Duke student, having trouble with the incredulity of it all. That’s okay. Just live like you believe, and God will give you faith. And remember, nothing is impossible for the one we love and serve.

ⁱ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, BOOKS Publishing, 2015, 103

ⁱⁱ “Military Dad Surprises His Twin Cheerleader Daughters at College Basketball Game”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF-DHtZmCLM

ⁱⁱⁱ Borha Phorn, ABC News, “Anonymous man pays off all layaway items at a Vermont Walmart,

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/anonymous-man-pays-off-layaway-items-vermont-walmart/story?id=5929080>

^{iv} Alexa Lardieri, “Anonymous Buyers Pay Off Thousands in Walmart Layaway Items” *US News*, December 6, 2018,

<https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2018-12-06/anonymous-buyers-pay-off-thousands-in-walmart-layaway-items>

^v Luke 24:49

^{vi} Acts 1:14

^{vii} Matthew 19:26

^{viii} Genesis 18:14

^{ix} *Bits and Pieces*, January 9, 1992, 1-2.

^x Howard Thurman, “The Singing of Angels” *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*, Friends United Press, 1985, 10

^{xi} William Willimon, Noel Snyder, ed. *Preaching Master Class: Lessons from Will Willimon’s Five-Minute Preaching Workshop*, Wipf & Stock, 2010, 82

^{xii} Matthew 20:26

^{xiii} Matthew 5:39

^{xiv} Matthew 5:44