

“THE IMPOSSIBLE BEGINS WITH LOVE”

by the Rev. Victor Kim

Luke 1:26-38

(12-20-20) Advent 4

It's a crazy story, this story of Christmas. Just think about it, think about what the story claims. It's unbelievable! Angels appearing to old priests and young girls, to shepherds in the fields and to a man who would have done the honorable thing if he was allowed. An old woman well beyond her time being told she's going to become pregnant, and even harder to swallow, a young virgin being told she's going to be pregnant, not only pregnant, but the child will be God's child, the Son of God. Later on, you've got Magi from somewhere in the East, following a magical star that just appears out of nowhere and that leads them to Jerusalem where they ultimately outwit the ruling king. It's all so ridiculous, so impossible!

But who needs a God for the possible? Who wants a God who only does the reasonable, the sensible, the possible? And what kind of faith is it that only looks for the doable, the imaginable, the manageable? That's not faith, that's just process. You don't need faith to put together an IKEA cabinet, you just need instructions and a whole lot of patience, but you don't need faith. You don't need faith to get an education, you just need discipline and a love for learning. Faith should be reserved for those things requiring higher degrees of difficulty. Things like virgin births or choirs of angels or portable stars. And as Gabriel the angel says so succinctly, "For nothing is impossible with God."

The converse of faith is fear. If faith is really about the impossible, then fear is what keeps us from really knowing the fullness of faith. Fear is what keeps our faith reasonable, manageable, doable, sensible. If we never overcome our fears, we'll never really know what faith is capable of. The theme of our Advent season is, "Do not be afraid." Mary was afraid, at least that's where she started in the story. The angel Gabriel shows up out of the blue one day to a young woman named Mary. She's engaged, but not yet married and she's a virgin. "Greetings, favoured one, the Lord is with you," says Gabriel to a clearly scared Mary. The words perplexed and pondering don't do justice to what the original Greek words intended. Mary was terrified and confused all at once. The angel senses her fear and says to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God." When God wants to do us a favour! You'd better believe that is the time when we should be scared! And boy, is that ever the case for Mary! Gabriel says that she will conceive, she, a virgin! And she will bear a son to be named Jesus and of his kingdom there will be no end!

If you're Mary, I don't know how you take that all in, how you could possibly process this news, this favour that God wants to do for you? But in the end she does and I spoke last week of Mary's trust. She trusts God, she trusts what the angel is saying to her, not because she

understands it fully, but because she trusts fully the one who does. Notice that Mary's question to Gabriel isn't about whether what Gabriel tells her will happen or not, but rather how it will happen. Mary doesn't say, I don't believe you, but instead she asks, how will this take place? Mary moves from her initial fear to a place of faith, to being able to say, I am the servant of the Lord... because she knows that her God, the God of Israel, the God of her faith, isn't stopped by the impossible. Her God is a God for whom nothing is impossible.

In our video this morning, Andrea talks about her fears as a brand new mother to be. Those of you who are mothers watching this morning, I think you would know very well what Andrea is going through, and you fathers too. You share in the fears and anxiety about becoming a parent for the first time. I know I sure did. You worry about whether you're doing all the right things, whether you're taking care of yourself so that you can take care of the life growing in you. And you do fear for the future, whether you'll be the kind of mother or parent that your child will need you to be. How many of us, when we were first considering becoming parents didn't fear at some point that we didn't have the knowledge, the experience, maybe even the makeup to be the kind of parent or mother or father that we knew our child or children would need? But at some point, we move beyond our fear and we move to faith, to believing that we can be what our child will need us to be, even if imperfectly. We have faith that we will have the support, from family and friends and from God to become the parents we need to be. And as it happens over and over again all over the world, a young woman, a young girl, not always wise and often full of fears, not only gives birth but becomes a mother!

Well, good for Mary, good for Joseph, but I couldn't do what they did, you think. But I'm not so sure. You think that yours is a faith that isn't familiar with the impossible, like Mary's was, but you'd be wrong. You and I are people of faith, and faith in and of itself, is a miracle. Think about that. You're watching this service, you've been watching these services and way back when, when we were able to meet in person, you'd come to church to participate in worship. Just the fact that you believe in this Christmas story, that you believe in Jesus, is a miracle. The fact of the matter is that faith is an impossibility on our own. The kind of faith we have in Jesus Christ as the child of the manger, born to Mary in Bethlehem, foretold by angels, visited by shepherds and Magi, the faith we have in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as the Messiah, as the one crucified and risen, as the one who reigns with the Father and the Spirit, this faith doesn't come because we will it. We don't get this kind of faith because we figured it out, because there's a set of instructions that all we needed to do was follow. We get this faith as a gift. It's only because of God's Spirit, because of the Holy Spirit, that we come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. It's impossible otherwise. You and I, our faith, is a miracle of God's doing.

And here's the thing, the impossible always starts with love. It's the love of God for the world that God has created, it's the love of God for the people that God created in God's image, it's the love of God for the people of God's covenant, for the people of Israel, for all of us, it's the love of God that defines the faith of Mary's people, a love that's been born out over and over

again in how God has acted to save, restore and redeem God's people, it's that love that allows Mary to overcome her fear and move to faith.

It's that love of God for us, for you and me, that plants the seed of faith in us that starts us on our journeys. It's that love of God for us that's always there in the back of our minds, whether we act on it or not, acknowledge it or not, that we've always sort of known, that finally can release us from whatever fears and doubts we have and ultimately move us to a place of faith. It's the love in us that moves us from fearing about how we will be able to look after our children to becoming the parents that our children need.

And in that love, in that faith, God can move us from our fears and do the impossible, even through us. You see, I don't think we imagine big enough, dream wide enough, for the kind of miracles that we are, that our faith in us allows us to be. We allow our fear of the impossible, of the outrageous, of the unbelievable to temper, tame and tamp down our faith. But what if we were able to hear the words of the angels, of Gabriel to a bewildered Mary? Do not be afraid! What if we believed that!

Shannon Kershner is the minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and she tells this story of faith and fear. About 15 years ago Shannon met a woman named Sherry. I was a fairly new pastor at a church in Texas, and my name was out on the marquee. She'd apparently drive by to and from work every day, and one day she decided to stop in and asked to speak with me. She'd seen my name and wanted to speak with a clergywoman. She came into my office and sat down. She had the quietest voice I've ever heard, so I would have to just lean so close to even hear her. She began to tell me her story: about domestic abuse and about the fear she experienced every day in her home at the hands of her husband. What drove her to my office that day was that she started to see it become a threat to her daughter. She told me this, then she would use a lot of religious language and talk about her church.

I had to ask, "It sounds like you have a church home. Why are you coming to visit with me about what's going on?" She said, "Well, I know what my pastor would say if I went to him. He would tell me that I'm not being submissive and that this abuse is my cross to bear, and that clearly this is just what's going to happen, given the fact that my husband is the head of our household. I know what he would say, and I want to know what you're going to say."

We talked some. I mean, I had to put away all the seminary language, and talk in other ways about how I understood some of those scriptures. I said, "The root of it is that God wants you to be whole and safe, and that's what God wants for your daughter." I had some resources that I gave her. I mean, you just feel so inadequate. I myself was afraid in that situation for her, in that small town. I wrote her name on a sticky note and put it on my computer and vowed to pray for her on a regular basis, and I did. I said, "If you feel safe enough will you check in at some point and tell me what's going on." I didn't hear anything for a couple years, says

Kershner. Then I got a phone call from a woman who was leaving a domestic abuse shelter in Dallas, trying to make her way across the country, and needed some financial assistance for gas. We got her what she needed, filled up her van, and right before she was leaving, I said, “Now, wait a minute, who told you to call me, how’d you get us?” She said, “Sherry. I met her at the shelter, and she told me that I could call here.” That meant both that Sherry was safe, and that something had happened in those two years where she had been able to get out.¹

It’s the impossible, leaving a situation that seems hopeless and helpless. It seems impossible to find the courage to overcome so much history, shame and abuse. But Sherry did because in the end, her faith overcame her fear, but it started because she was told that someone loved her, because Shannon loved her and told her about a God who loved her and her daughter. The impossible always begins with love.

I wonder whether our faith is too timid, too tame. I wonder whether this Christmas we could really believe that our faith is a miracle, that it’s the impossible become possible, and that if say we believe in things like virgin’s giving birth and people rising from the dead, whether we could also believe that God might want to do something that seems impossible through us, through our faith. Maybe it’s a relationship you think is dead and can’t be resurrected. Impossible you say. But is it really or is it our fears that suppress the love needed to shock the heart back into beating? Maybe it’s our fear of suffering or even of dying that stops us from responding to what faith has stirred up in our hearts. It seems impossible that we would be able to overcome those fears, but love frees us from fear because we know that suffering and even death has been redeemed by God and nothing is beyond God’s reach. Do not be afraid.

Maybe this is the year that we really do something about being part of the solution around our environmental stewardship or about healing and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Too hard you say. Impossible you protest. You fear that your work will be in vain, that your effort will not be rewarded. But start with love, start with the love of God in you, for you, for the world God created, which called good and of which God told us to be stewards. Start with love, with God’s love for you and in you so that our faith would work in ways that honour all people created in God’s image as equals. Overcome the fears that lead us to believe that it’s impossible. Have the faith that allows us to know that these things don’t always happen quickly, that they will take time, even generations, that we won’t necessarily be around to see the fruits of our work, but have faith to know that others will and that what once seemed impossible is now reality.

It’s been a year like no other. Let this Christmas be a Christmas like no other, a Christmas when we don’t just hear the same old story again, but a Christmas when we really hear the story,

¹ Shannon Kershner, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/story-table-faith-and-fear/>

the absolute unbelievable story and remember that we believe it. We believe it because we have faith and that kind of faith is a miracle, that nothing is impossible with God, with a God who loves us so much. This Christmas, this year, let that faith in you imagine more, dream bigger, dare deeper, let something new be born in you, in us.

God wants to do us a favour. But do not be afraid. For nothing is impossible with God. But remember, the impossible always begins with love.

Thanks be to God, Amen.