

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 21, 2008
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Samuel 7:4, 8-16
Psalm 132:8-18
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Just prior to our Gospel lesson this morning, God has surprised Zechariah while he is doing his priestly duty in the temple. The angel Gabriel informs him that he and Elizabeth will have a son, even though they are physically now unable to have children.

When Zechariah struggles to believe the news, he is struck speechless until several months later when their son, John, is born.

In our lesson today, the angel visits Mary, a young teenage girl who lives in Nazareth. Nazareth was a tiny village in Galilee that had a reputation for being the kind of place that only a public relations genius could convince you to spend any time there. If motorized vehicles would have existed in the first century, the likely epithet for Nazareth would have been that the only good thing ever to come out of Nazareth was an empty bus!

But in this tiny, nondescript village lives an ordinary teenage girl who is engaged to a man named Joseph. And for reasons known only to God, the angel visits her as well. The angel describes a series of events to Mary that are every bit

as ludicrous and unbelievable as what happened to Zechariah and Elizabeth, perhaps even more so.

Even though she has yet to be with Joseph, Mary will become pregnant. The son she bears will be called the Son of the Most High, and will reign over Israel forever. The power of God will come onto the scene, and by the power of the Holy Spirit Mary will literally smuggle God into the world through her own body.

Now, admittedly, a story like this stretches the notions of credibility and common sense to the very breaking point. All of the writers of every T.V. soap opera combined couldn't come up with a script like this. Reality T.V. would pale in comparison to this. It is such a stretch that we can only ask ourselves, "how?"

How could this ever happen? That's Mary's question, as well. The angel responds by saying, "in case you doubt what I'm saying, look at your relative Elizabeth, the barren woman who cannot have children. She's already six months along."

And at that moment, a young teenage girl is faced with an enormous challenge. A challenge that has come disguised as an opportunity. *The challenge that lies before her is the willingness to believe that the word "impossible" is not in God's vocabulary.*

In her moment of divine encounter, Mary looks deep within herself, and rises to the challenge. She responds with humble faith. She agrees to smuggle the Son of God into the world through her own body.

As we move deep into this season of Advent, I find myself humbled and amazed again at the Scripture texts we have encountered in this holy season. We heard the people cry out to God in Isaiah 64, saying:

Oh, how we wish you would blow the doors to heaven open and come down with power to save us! But we are infected with sin from head to foot, so how can people like us be saved? Every good thing we do added together only makes a filthy rag. What hope is there for people like us?" (Is. 64:1-7)

We've heard from Isaiah that we are all like the grass that withers and flowers that wither and die away. We are like leaves that fall from the trees and are swept away by the cold, November wind.

We've heard from Peter that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and the earth will be burned and consumed under the fire of God's judgment.

We've heard Isaiah and John the Baptist call on us to repent, to prepare our lives and to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. But when we look within, and we see the dark places of our hearts, when we see the brokenness that still lies within us and within our families, and when we confront the hopelessness that infects our world, we are left dumbfounded and speechless.

And when our power of speech returns, we are left asking: HOW?

How, God, can you fix what is wrong in my life?

How, God, can you fix what is wrong in my family?

How, God, can you fix what is happening in this wonderful world you've made? What possible hope can there be for *me*? For *us*?

Every day that we move into this Advent season takes us deeper into the darkness. The days grow increasingly short, and the sun sets sooner. Today, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves in church on the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year.

I want to tell you something this morning, something that is worth squaring back your shoulders and sitting on the edge of your seat to hear. The God who sought out a teenage girl in a backwoods village in Galilee, and who recruited her into the greatest smuggling operation in human history, knows where *you* live as well. He will find you. He will visit you. You can count on it.

But the Good News comes to us this morning, as it did to Mary, as both a challenge and an opportunity. On this 21st day of December, the shortest and darkest day of the year, we are faced with this simple question: *Are we willing to believe that the word "impossible" is not in God's vocabulary?*

Of all the messages of this holy season, surely this is foremost among them. In fact, if someone off the street were to ask me now about Advent, what it means,

and why it's important, my answer to them would be this: Advent is a reminder to us that the word "impossible" cannot be found in God's dictionary.

If this is indeed true, then the urgency and importance of this news matters more *now* than ever before -- not only for the world, but also for the Church.

Now I cannot point you this morning to a pregnant old woman like Gabriel did to Mary as testimony that the word "impossible" is not to be found in God's lexicon. What I *can* point you to is the ordinary stuff of bread and wine. And I will tell you that as you come to the table this morning, these signs are a vehicle of God's grace. They are God's messenger, whispering to you, "nothing is impossible with God."

On this darkest day of the year, let us open our hearts anew to the God of infinite possibilities. Then let us go forth in faith, waiting to greet the Light of the world as he is smuggled into our midst.

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