

Mary: "How Can This Be?"

Gabriel: "Nothing Will Be Impossible With God."

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

December 19, 2021 Fourth Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Love

and Mary Sunday

Luke 1:26-55

Welcome and Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Love and Mary Sunday.

Once a woman came home in the dark feeling exhausted from work. Her young children were waiting for her to decorate the tree. It had been a gloomy, grey day, but as she got out of the car the clouds parted around one star.

She paused and took it in. It was what she needed, a glimpse of hope and peace in the darkness, just enough to enable her to go in the house and shine, like an Advent star of joy and love for her children.

This is our task: to allow ourselves to be filled with the miraculous power of light that comes to us in the midst of darkness, and then pass that light along to others.

Let us open our hearts to whatever light we find here and allow it to shine after the service as we greet those around us, extending our care and support especially to those we do not know or know are struggling so all may go out from here shining greater light into the world.

Call to Worship: Advent is about waiting and watching for the coming of a miracle of love and light in Jesus. It is also about our participation in the miracle.

Today we see this whole miracle-making process in Mary, starting when the angel Gabriel came to her and she said yes to the impossible thing God wanted to do through her. The 20th Century contemplative and writer, Thomas Merton, said Mary's gift was emptying herself of self so she could be like a pure pane of glass through which the light of God's love could shine.

Advent waiting and watching in faith is the first step of self-emptying that leads to inner transformation so that we bring more Christ-like love into the world. Let us worship together celebrating the making of Mary's miracle, and waiting, watching and opening to make our own.

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Prayer of Confession:

Holy God, we confess that when your angel comes
Announcing we are pregnant with God's gifts,
Telling us that we have Christ within us,
Blessing us with goodness and light
To deliver to the world, so often
We do not respond as Mary did.
We disbelieve or hide in fear or make excuses.
We let our busyness or plans distract us.
Please forgive us, O God.
Help us to begin anew now.
Help us to say as Mary did,
"Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
Let it be with me according to your word."
Help us have the courage, faith and humble love
To bring forth the gifts
You have given us to share.

Assurance of Pardon and Grace: The most common miracle in the universe is the Holy Spirit taking lifeless or lightless things and transforming and reordering them to be capable of life and light. It happens in galaxies, in compost bins and in our own hearts. God's love frees us from our past ways of being and God's wisdom guides us to greater life and light and love.

Lighting of the Advent Candle: Jesus taught that everything in our whole religion comes down to loving God and loving our neighbor as our self. So today on this last Sunday of Advent we give the place of honor to the candle of love.

The scriptures talk about the light of God's love in Jesus Christ. Here is some of what the first letter of John says:

"God is light...Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light...We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help...? God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.... The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

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The word Advent means the approach or coming of something. We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of Christ's light into the world. With Christ's advent come three forms of love: God's love of us; our love of God; and God's love and ours for all people and all creation. Christ's love is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome—a light that shines in us when we love.

Giving love is as much a gift as receiving love. So we do this with thanks to God for all the love we have received in our life, and for all the love we have been able to give to others. This Advent we ask that we may be as generous-hearted as Jesus was, who gave love to all people: old and young, healthy and sick, rich and poor, neighbors and enemies. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us find ways to shine the light of love especially on those who need it most in this darkest time of the year.

Sermon: *Mary: "How Can This Be?" Gabriel: "Nothing Will Be Impossible With God."*

Look at how much of the story we just heard seems impossible—not only the angel Gabriel, not only the miraculous pregnancies of a young teen and old woman, but also the seemingly impossible reversals of authoritarian systems of inequity: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Today we face a pandemic and political polarization that feel impossible to end. We live in a time when the majority of people want the climate crisis reversed, and economic injustice reversed, and racial oppression reversed, and the hungry filled with good things and the super-rich taxed for it, and yet all these feel impossible because we cannot bring down the powerful corporations and corrupt politicians from their thrones.

Of course, we do not need to look that far to find impossible situations. We have plenty in our own lives—the stuck places, the stubborn unhealthy habits, the inner or outer obstacles that seem as if they will block you forever from the life you long to live or the love you long to give.

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The story we heard today calls to us to lift up our heads, to believe that the light shines in the darkness, that even now a dawn is coming that we cannot yet see but that this story asks us to trust.

This Advent I have been talking about the path of kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia, meaning:

- self-emptying (kenosis)
- in order to let the heart and mind of Christ grow in us (metanoia)
- so that we fill to overflowing with his unconditional love (agape)
- and create the realm of God's beloved community around us (koinonia).

But even that first step of kenosis can feel impossible. As soon as we try to let go of our self-concern we discover the tenacity of the ego in pursuit of its agenda for happiness, its obsessive desire for things like approval and security, power and control, pleasure and success.

Centering prayer or meditation is first and foremost the practice of kenosis, when we seek to let go of thoughts and turn our hearts and minds to the silent presence of the Spirit, but even the greatest saints can maintain that self-emptying attitude in centering prayer for about two minutes before their brain gets caught up in thinking again, and they have to return to the practice of letting go.

Many people give up meditation because they get discouraged and decide they will never be able to do it—that for them, kenosis is impossible. They say “No thank you” to the angel inviting them to follow Mary's path of inner and world transformation.

The story in Luke shows us that there is a step we need before kenosis, a step that helps us say yes to that path. The step we need is to believe Gabriel that “nothing will be impossible with God.” As Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, puts it in the story, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by God.”

It was because of Mary's willing suspension of disbelief that she received the blessing of the Spirit doing the impossible through her.

But what enabled her to believe? What can help us believe in the face of impossible situations so that we may work the miracles those situations need?

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The first Sunday of Advent I told the story of two young teenagers who were in an impossible situation during World War II. The Warsaw Ghetto had been destroyed by the Nazis. They were the only members left alive of their families and were hiding in a collapsed basement. The Nazis surrounded the Ghetto with barbed wire and searched for survivors with patrols. The children were in danger of starving or freezing to death. There seemed to be no way out.

Then on the first night of Hanukkah they happened to find a stub of candle and matches, and the power of that flickering, brief light was enough to make them risk the dangerous to escape. What did they see in that light that made them able to believe that with God, nothing would be impossible?

The second Sunday of Advent I told the story of Nathan and Louise Degrafinried. An escaped convict appeared at their door and pointed a shotgun at Nathan's chest. It was an impossible situation, but Louise walked right into it and said, "I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in violence. Put down that gun and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here."

Louise trusted in a power that seems impossibly weak compared to a shotgun in violent hands. It led her to give the young man dry socks, and feed him a big breakfast, and calm down the police who came to arrest him, and then work for his release from prison and comfort him while he was there.

What led her to believe that with God, nothing would be impossible, so that she was able to work that miracle?

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl saw the answer over and over in the Nazi deathcamps where he was a prisoner. A bird singing at dawn, a brilliant sunset, a light from a farmhouse shining in the darkness, a kind word—all these could spark a tiny candle flame of meaning and love in an inmate's heart and help them believe that with God nothing would be impossible. It helped them perform the daily miracles that saved them.

That spark of love is what the children in the Warsaw Ghetto saw when they looked into one another's eyes for the first time in weeks by the light of that small Hanukkah flame, love of one another, love of life, and love of the source of the light and all it meant.

Louise told that dangerous young man that God loved him and so did she, and she proved it with her actions.

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The First Letter of John says that “love casts out fear.” (I John 4:18) Fear closes our hearts but love opens them so that we are not afraid to believe, so that the Spirit can flow through us with miracles of far greater love that can transform the world.

Clouds part and an Advent star appears and lifts a tired woman so she can perform a miracle of love for her children. We need to keep opening to the light in trust because it is always there, and it always wants to shine its love through us into this world.

The Christian ideal is the impossible belief in a love that overcomes every other power on earth, a love that makes miracles happen, a love that transforms us into people who bear the light of Christ.

We need to follow the path of kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia in order to work the miracles our world now needs, but to choose that spiritual path requires first believing that God can accomplish the impossible. And to believe requires first loving the glimpses of God at work that we can see.

So keep waiting and watching in the silence of Advent darkness, because it is coming, that one star, that one candle flame, that one ray of love. It is coming to you.

Watch for the angels in everyday life, in a stranger, in nature, in inspired music or words, calling us to open our hearts to work miracles of love.

Let us prepare ourselves to say with Mary, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Let us say it now in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

December chickadees inside
one of these snow-covered trees
singing.

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