

“For nothing will be impossible with God.”

The scene we just heard described in today’s Gospel seems strangely out of place in this season of the year. Here we are just four days before Christmas, when we remember and celebrate our Lord’s birth, and we are hearing the story of his conception. In fact, this Gospel lesson is the one read for the Feast of the Annunciation which occurs more appropriately on March 25 (9 months before Christmas). So why do we hear this story about Mary on the fourth Sunday of Advent?

Advent is the beginning of the church’s liturgical year. It is the season in which the church is called to repent, to change direction, to break free from old patterns and look to God for new possibilities. It is more than a penitential season, like Lent; it is a time for us to get in tune with Almighty God and hear and participate in the unexpected—that is, discovering what God is doing in our world.

That is why certain biblical figures are central in Advent. We look to the Hebrew prophets as they pointed to the one to come— Emmanuel, God with us, and the Prince of Peace. We look to John the Baptist and his message of repentance from sin and the practice of every day justice. And we look to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her great trust in God that helped to change the world forever.

The scene described today, with Mary and the angel Gabriel, has been captured by great artists throughout history. There is beauty and tenderness, power and complexity, in the angel’s words and Mary’s response that captures something bigger than their actual encounter. In some ways, this scene represents God’s constant invitation to all of us to believe what God can do; and respond in ways that transform our darkness into light, our hatred and misunderstanding into love and forgiveness.

One preacher described this scene by saying that all the angels bent down from heaven and held their breath as they awaited Mary’s response. What would she say? Would Mary be a unique part of God’s unfolding plan in our world? Of course we know the rest of the story. Mary did say “Yes.” And though some may prefer to minimize or mythologize the story, the world *was* changed. Today there are over one billion Christians in the world that believe in Jesus because Mary said “Yes.”

Saying “Yes” to God can be very hard. For Mary, it was trusting in what was a biological impossibility, against the laws of nature. Not only that, being found pregnant before she was married could have led to Mary being sent away in shame at best; or stoned to death at worst. Mary’s yes was a brave and faithful thing to do. By following God’s lead, Mary and her family would be at risk. And Mary made her decision without knowing what the results would be throughout the world two millennia later. Amazing.

Of course, Mary and her story are unique. She was chosen to be the mother of our Lord. Mary had special burdens and joys that are way beyond what any of us encounter in our lives. As Simeon the prophet said to Mary as she and Joseph presented the baby Jesus in the Temple, “a sword will pierce your own soul, too” (Luke 2:35). Mary’s obedience was pivotal to our salvation.

And yet, the church does hold up Mary as an example for all of us during this season of Advent. Her life and faith point to a path that is available for every person to take—the path of saying “Yes” to God in our lives, not only as individuals, but as a community of faith. For us, too, God’s call may seem impossible. Maybe not biologically impossible, like a virgin conceiving a child without a human father; but psychologically impossible, as we often doubt and have fears about what God can do in our lives and in our world.

Have you ever felt a nudge to do something beyond your comfort zone and then said, “Nah.” In my experience, we usually have good reasons not to say yes. The human mind is very powerful in coming up with reasons why something cannot work. That is a good thing in many ways. It can help us grow up safe and learn not to jump off the roof of our house with a blanket around our neck, thinking we can fly like Superman. But that rationalization can go too far and cripple our faith and courage and keep us from doing what God is calling us to do.

What is the calling you have heard in your life that seemed “impossible”? Again, it may not be literally impossible, but it feels like it is to you. For me, I left a corporate job and downsized from a large house and caused many sacrifices for my family in order to pursue my calling to priesthood. It wasn’t literally impossible (after all, it happened). But more than one person gave me “that look” as they heard what I was planning to do. It seemed if not impossible at least crazy to them. Maybe it was.

Your individual “impossible” thing is for you to discern, with God’s help. I am glad to meet with you and listen and pray with you about it. I will do my best not to call you crazy or give you “that look.” Those types of conversations are usually exciting. But beyond our individual stories, we have a corporate story taking place right here, in and through this parish and the wider church. God is calling us to do things outside the normal patterns of our life. That

is something we can all pray about and discern together. It is unlikely that we will have to start with something as impossible as Mary's story. God will likely start slower with us (I think).

On January 30th next year, your new vestry and I will meet to pray about and plan for what is next for us as a parish. Some of the direction has been set and is very exciting. The obvious things going on right now are the capital campaign and expanding our building. There are times when they might seem impossible or at least really hard; but I think that with God's help, both are definitely within the realm of possibility. In fact, I believe that God will bless us in ways we don't expect.

So what does feel "impossible" for us as a community of faith? How might we be called to break the normal patterns that we follow every day? How can we listen for God in the unexpected? I can think of many different areas, but one I want to explore with you and others in 2015 is **the way we relate to people who are different from us**. It is such a normal human tendency to be with folks we like and who are like us. It may be age, social and economic class, education, region of the country we are from, ethnicity, race and probably a dozen more categories. We often narrow our lives based on our similarities.

I believe part of God's unfolding plan is to change that reality for us. Not that we can't have friends that are like us and that we like. But what God is doing in the world stretches so far beyond that. And if we listen closely and get in tune with what God is doing, it will change us—and start to change our world. I offer this direction for us to pursue not as idealism or ideology, but as a calling from God that helps us to explore what may feel impossible.

One specific way for us to do this is through conversations I am planning for us in Adult Christian Education and Wednesday nights in Lent and other settings. These conversations will include people like us and people who are different from us. My hope is to create an environment in which we can hear voices and experiences we don't always hear—and that other people can do the same. And then beyond simply hearing, we can respond and take steps together that are different from our normal path. Taking those steps can lead us to a new and broader sense of community as a people of faith. If we can follow Mary's example, trust God and be brave, I believe we can do what some may call impossible. Amen.