

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2020

You've Got to Be Kidding?

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Canticle 15

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

On this Fourth Sunday in the Advent season, we are focused on love. First of all, our attention turns to the love that God had for all of His creation that He might contemplate taking on human form in the person of Jesus to effect the salvation of his creation. That's the definition of love...to put aside one's own interest and comfort and risk all in order to save another. Holy Scripture tells us the stories of God's inbreaking into the affairs of his beloved Israel. God stepped in to save his creation from the flood when Noah constructed the ark. The inbreaking of the holy occurred throughout the life of Moses when he was rescued as an infant from certain death by the daughter of the Pharaoh; when he petitioned the Pharaoh to let the enslaved Israelites go; when he parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape; and when he was given the Ten Commandments by God at the summit of Mt. Sinai and when he led them for 40 years through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The Scripture passages of the Old Testament weave together multiple occasions detailing the experience of holy inbreaking in the affairs of mankind when God made his presence known.

God shows his love for his creation in multiple ways, but none is more powerful or more stunning than the creation of His Son, our savior Jesus Christ, who came to us in human form so that we might be salvaged from our rebellion against and separation from God. We human beings...as a species...seem to be perpetually adolescent...on the one hand seeking the favor and love of our creator and then almost mercurially rebelling against our creator and claiming our own right to independence and separation from the one we fear might ultimately control us. That adolescent dance is played out individually and communally as we struggle to find the balance between connection and separation. We long for, but at the same time we are afraid of, the connection we seek with God. Our fear is that we will be subsumed into a power greater than ourselves and our sense of self and independence will be lost forever. This dance between God and human beings has been going on since the beginning of time. The amazing thing is, God doesn't give up on us...ever. God continues to break into our world with interventions of love and care even when we neither want it nor deserve it. That's the power of love. That's the power of God's love for us. God never gives up on us. God's message to us is that redemption is not only possible...it has already happened in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To prove God's love for us, God came to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And he

came to us through a young adolescent Jewish girl named Mary living in the small sleepy town of Nazareth nestled in the mountains.

Like all adolescents, Mary must have been struggling with finding her voice and discovering who she was. She must have been pushing away from her parents while at the same time clinging to them desperately lest she get lost and left on her own before she was ready. She was doing her own adolescent dance with her own human parents. She had taken a step toward breaking away from them by entering into an engagement with a young man named Joseph. And now, unpredictably and without fanfare, she's visited by an angel named Gabriel and she is told some astonishing and somewhat disturbing news. God has chosen her to be the mother of God's son. We can only wonder what must have been going through her head as she listened to Gabriel. And we are amazed that she didn't say to the Angel the Jewish equivalent of, "You've got to be kidding!" She didn't seem to be afraid...either of the Angel Gabriel or the message that he gave to her. She had a choice. She could have said, "No thank you. Please find someone else." But she didn't. She listened. She expressed her confusion about how such a thing could happen since she had not known a man, but she accepted Gabriel's explanation...nothing is impossible for God. As the news of this holy inbreaking sank in, Mary must have begun to feel her heart fill up with the same kind of love that prompted the inbreaking of the holy in the first place.

God had chosen her because she found favor with God...not because of her own good behavior, but because she had nothing to offer to God except herself. She was lowly. She held no political power. She didn't come from a prestigious family. She had no wealth or social position. She simply had a pure heart and a capacity to hear and listen when God spoke. God's choice of Mary to be the mother of God's son had to do with the kind of person she was and it also set the stage for the grand reversal among human beings that God revealed in Mary's singing of the Magnificat. Mary seemed to be on the same wavelength with God. She seemed to understand God in a way that few human beings do. Mary anticipates that God's justice and peace may turn her world...and our world...upside down...and this is very good news. She's not subsumed by God. She's voluntarily working in concert with God. She seems to be willing...perhaps even eager...for the holy disruption that is about to befall her. She knows this will be a scandalous event. She knows she's going to have trouble explaining this to Joseph...and to her parents. She knows she's going to be talked about by the women gathering at the well every morning. But she seems to be at peace with all of that. She knows that she will be set apart. The prospect of social isolation and ostracism that may occur doesn't seem to phase her. Like anyone listening to God's call and instructions, she feels her feet on solid ground...even if the ground may be shifting. At a time in her life when she might have held doubts and fears, she does not have either one. She's sure-footed.

Just as Mary is learning so early in her life, we also hold a certain awareness that we are not fully in charge of our destiny which ebbs and is revived repeatedly throughout our lives. We can all look back on times in our lives when we clearly saw God's fingerprints all over everything even when we might not have been aware of God's presence in the moment.

As Mary thinks about all that the Angel Gabriel has revealed to her, she has questions...just as we do...or would if we were in her position. She mulls over what she's heard and then asks, "How can this be?" Haven't we asked the same question more than once during our lives? Haven't we all heard of situations...or perhaps have been at the center of situations...where a tumor, perhaps, inexplicably shrinks for no apparent reason and mortal threat is gone? Or a blood test that we were certain would be returned with a very bad outcome that comes back to us completely normal? Don't we then utter the words, "How can this be?" Or perhaps it's news of a different kind. We get a phone call from a friend who tells us that a mutual friend has just died and we cry, "How can that be? I just had lunch with him yesterday." A collective cry of anguish goes up when a school or a neighborhood is struck by a calamity that affects multiple people. And we think: "How can this be?" Mary's puzzling over the statements from Gabriel gives us permission to take some time to adjust to astonishing or startling news and to question God's agency in these events. "How can this be?" is the reverberating refrain that shapes our faith by reminding us how much is hidden from us. The exclamation of these four little words may very well signify our unconscious knowledge of the nearness of God. We know that God is moving in the world. We just simply do not always understand in what ways God moves or for what reasons.

The Angel Gabriel's answer to Mary's exclamation, "How can this be?" is the promise and the hope of God's agency in our own lives: "For nothing will be impossible with God." This doesn't mean that God complies with a Wish List that we offer up in much the same way small children make their wishes known to Santa Claus just before Christmas. This statement of God's power..."for nothing will be impossible with God"...is more a statement of God's ability and willingness to support us, to comfort us, to guide us in those situations where we feel caught between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army. That statement is for all the times when we feel underqualified for the task at hand or unprepared to deal with the emergency that has just arisen. In those situations, our prayer of faith will always be: "for nothing will be impossible with God."

Certainly Mary could not see a clear way out...where she could maintain her place in her family and the love and support of her parents or her standing in the community given the information she would have to share with them. Her reputation did not suffer. Her family did not desert her. Her fiancé did not quietly divorce her and put her aside. He married her and

helped her raise her child. None of these things were part of the expected social order in the world in which Mary lived, but we know that “nothing will be impossible with God.” And we know that God does not ask us to step forward into situations that are alien to us and then abandon us to the forces that be. That’s not how God works.

This is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. It is the Sunday that we celebrate God’s love and prepare for it to be with us in Jesus Christ. For God is love. In the beginning...and for evermore.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.