

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Bob Munshaw

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

For nothing will be impossible with God. So said the angel Gabriel to Mary. It was an incredible story that he'd told her, and I think Brian was right last week when he told us that most of us have heard the Christmas story so often that we get inoculated against it. I'm wondering on this fourth Sunday of Advent if we can't somehow hear the story anew. When the angels met with the shepherds and when Gabriel met Mary, one of the first messages was – Fear not!

I think ... that what I think ... is that it is very easy for any and maybe all of us to get sucked into a very tamed version of Christianity ... something benign where we try and be mostly good most of the time ... and go to church... and do our civic and religious duties – like swearing allegiance to God and to the queen. It is easy to think nicey nice thoughts about God, because of God's love and mercy and grace. We too easily think of God as tame to the point where God might as well be non-existent in our lives. Many think of the Christian life as boring.

But ... but... when individuals encounter God or angelic beings in the Biblical accounts, their reaction is most often awe and fear. Isaiah is summoned to the throne room of God and says whoa is me, for I am a sinful man. John has his vision of heaven, recorded in Rev. 1, and there he fell to the ground as a dead man. When Moses met with God on the mountain, he had to put a veil over his face because he was glowing. When God makes earthly visitations in the Old Testament, lightning flashes on the mountains ... thunder quakes and people tremble in fear.

And so the angel's first words to Mary were to calm her fears and help her to realize that it's going to be ok. This messenger from God ... which is shocking and fear provoking enough if you think of it ... is not there to smite her, but instead to invite her to one of the most incredible plans that is imaginable. And I invite you to reflect with awe at what is happening here ... awe at the power of God, but also awe at the mercy of God ... fear not, because God is doing something amazing. Fear not, because God is coming here out of love for us. In the mid 19th century the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard wrote a simple story to try to get at the heart of this message of God's love that first Christmas. Here's what he wrote.

A prince wanted to find a maiden suitable to be his queen. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father, he passed through a poor section. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage, his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love. □□But he had a problem. How would he seek her hand? He could order her to marry him. But even a prince wants his bride to marry him freely and voluntarily and not through coercion. He could put on his most splendid uniform and

drive up to her front door in a carriage drawn by six horses. But if he did this he would never be certain that the maiden loved him or was simply overwhelmed with all of the splendor. □□The prince came up with another solution. He would give up his kingly robe. He moved, into the village, entering not with a crown but in the garb of a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language. In time the maiden grew to love him, because of who he was and because he loved her first.□□This very simple, almost childlike story is what John is describing here—God came and lived among us. He had to reveal Himself to us in an understandable way, and this is precisely what Jesus did—became flesh just like you and me. He made Himself understandable.

Let's return to Mary for a few moments. What was her response to the message of the angel? "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." But by saying yes to God, Mary also had to realize that she was closing her heart to many, and maybe all of the plans that she had for her life.

With the scandal of an early pregnancy, there would be unbelief of family, friends, and strangers – who would believe that God had chosen a poor girl from among them to enter the world. There would be no big family wedding or celebration. Would Joseph even believe her? We don't read anything about Mary's immediate family in the story. Promiscuity ... sex before marriage was considered a sin so heinous that it could be punishable by death. (Deut 22:20ff) Did her family disown her?

Well, we'll never know the whole story on this side of the pearly gates, but do you wonder as Mary hurried out to the Judean town where Elizabeth lived, if she wasn't deeply disturbed and filled with questions. Perhaps she truly was second-guessing herself, wondering if the visit from Gabriel had been only a dream. Yet, as she woke up sick each morning she had to know.

You see, Jesus tells us in John 3 that God's ways are beyond ours. If we are following Him, there is no telling where and how he might lead us. Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3 "You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God." Jesus words baffle Nicodemus' mind. And yet this is how Christians truly live a life of faith. God leads ... and sometimes we are astounded at how God leads and works. We find that too often the things that are important to God catch us off guard.

In the lectionary reading from II Samuel, we find David ... and things are going great for David. We read that God has given him peace from his enemies. He has built himself a fine palace of cedar, and as he sits in comfort and peace, he gets to thinking that maybe God needs a place to settle down, too. For centuries, the presence of God in the community has been signified by the Ark of the Covenant, which had been set up in a tent. And when David suggests to Nathan that he should build God a house, God's response is ... have I ever suggested to any of the leaders of Israel that they should build me a house of cedar.

God cannot be controlled or tamed or domesticated. God is God, and he moves as he wishes, and where our faith comes in is that as we follow Him, and even perhaps sometimes as we don't follow Him, God is working in our lives to bring us to wholeness. David, in all of his wild adventures and in all of his challenges has certainly found that to be true. So, in the 89th Psalm he writes a poem or a song to God out of his experiences of God's faithfulness. He writes, "I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens."

A pastor from a church in the slums of New York tells of how Jesus changed his life on a Sunday. This story was from Easter, but it is a very fitting one for the Advent season. He writes:

It was Easter Sunday and I was so tired at the end of the day that I just went to the edge of the platform, pulled down my tie and sat down and draped my feet over the edge. It was a wonderful service with many people coming forward. The counselors were talking with these people.

As I was sitting there I looked up the middle aisle, and there in about the third row was a man who looked about fifty, disheveled, filthy. He looked up at me rather sheepishly, as if saying, "Could I talk to you?"

We have homeless people coming in all the time, asking for money or whatever. So as I sat there, I said to myself, though I am ashamed of it, "What a way to end a Sunday. I've had such a good time, preaching and ministering, and here's a fellow probably wanting some money for more wine."

He walked up. When he got within about five feet of me, I smelled a horrible smell like I'd never smelled in my life. It was so awful that when he got close, I would inhale by looking away, and then I'd talk to him, and then look away to inhale, because I couldn't inhale facing him. I asked him, "What's your name?"

"David."

"How long have you been on the street?"

"Six years."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-two."

He looked fifty—hair matted; front teeth missing; wino; eyes slightly glazed.

"Where did you sleep last night, David?"

"Abandoned truck."

I keep in my back pocket a money clip that also holds some credit cards. I fumbled to pick one out thinking; I'll give him some money. I won't even get a volunteer. They are all busy talking with others. Usually we don't give money to people. We take them to get something to eat.

I took the money out. David pushed his finger in front of me. He said, "I don't want your money. I want this Jesus, the One you were talking about, because I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die on the street."

I completely forgot about David, and I started to weep for myself. I was going to give a couple of dollars to someone God had sent to me. See how easy it is? I could make the excuse I was tired. There is no excuse. I was not seeing him the way God sees him. I was not feeling what God feels.

But oh, did that change! David just stood there. He didn't know what was happening. I pleaded with God, "God, forgive me! Forgive me! Please forgive me. I am so sorry to represent You this way. I'm so sorry. Here I am with my message and my points, and You send somebody and I am not ready for it. Oh, God!"

Like Mary, and like David, and like this NYC pastor, we are invited in these last days of Advent to open our hearts to God's plan and to the way that God wants to work in our lives and through us, and in our situations. The first Christmas story seemed to catch everyone off guard. Most of the Jewish people believed in God, of course. They had worshipped and listened to the Scriptures at their local synagogues. They had kept up with their sacrifices. They had made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to sacrifice at the temple and to celebrate the festivals that commemorated God working miraculously in their midst in the past. But when God entered time and space on that first Christmas as a babe in the manger, it was beyond their comprehension. How could this crying baby in the dirty straw, born in questionable circumstances at best, be God's solution to the brokenness of the world? How could this common teenage Jewish girl hold in her womb the God who created the universe? It is unexpected, it is shocking, it is scandalous ... and it is at the heart of the story of that first Christmas.