

Advent IV (RCL/B): "Two Impossibilities – and More"

Luke 1:46b-55; Luke 1:26-38

December 23-24, '23

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Today our Gospel (my **favorite** Gospel of the year!) starts, "*In the sixth month....*" (Lk. 1:26) In the 6th month of **what?**

Yes, the 6th month of Elizabeth's (& Zechariah's) pregnancy! Their pregnancy was a surprise.

Anyone remember **why?**

They'd been waiting so long to have a baby that they were sure they'd aged out and that it was never going to happen. Until the angel Gabriel pops into the Temple while Zechariah is serving and announces God is sending a baby after all....

14 "You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. 15-17 ... He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God... soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God."

[Speaking of skeptics! Read on:]

18 Zachariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

19-20 But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time."

(Luke 1, *The Message*)

Now 6 months have passed and Gabriel is on **another** errand (busier than one of Santa's elves....), this time a visit to Mary, Elizabeth's **much** younger cousin. If angels weren't so smart, and didn't know that God **often** sent them to the boonies to speak with out-of-the-way people in unlikely places, folks who were "of no account" in anyone's eyes except God's, then Gabriel would have double-checked his heavenly GPS to see if it had gone haywire. **Why** was he being directed to Nazareth, a town so deep in the sticks that people made fun of it? (Once a grown-up Jesus begins His public ministry, Philip invites his friend Nathaniel to come and meet Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, and Nathaniel scoffs, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth??*" John 1:46) Nazareth was the butt of a lot of jokes, like Secaucus, or like NJ! But

Gabriel didn't get to be an archangel by disobeying the Boss with a capital B. His marching orders said to go and speak with Mary in Nazareth and so he did.

First thing for us to remember: she was a kid. In most artwork she looks like she's late teens, early 20's. Actually, she was probably around 12 or 13, barely capable of having a child even if she'd been married. To put it mildly, she's "surprised" when Gabriel appears and says, "Ave, Maria." Though Gabriel wouldn't have said that exactly, because that's Latin and Mary wouldn't have understood it since she spoke Aramaic. St. Luke wrote his Gospel in Greek:

Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη! *"Hi, there, hola, ciao, O person filled with grace, favored by God."* Now the kid is even **more** confused. ("You talking to **me**?") How could one so young have distinguished herself so that God **favored** her?

Martin Luther had a great devotion to Mary. He wrote beautifully about the Magnificat, the song Mary sings when she and Elizabeth and their unborn sons get together, the Scripture we hear this weekend instead of a psalm. Luther is emphatic that Mary was quite **ordinary**, like the rest of us. It was God's love of her that was **extraordinary**, just like God's love of us.

Mary's young, but she's not stupid, so she asks her angelic visitor, "How can I have a baby, with no man in my life?" Gabriel's answer begins:

³⁵*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..."*

Bolstering his argument that anything is possible, he shares the startling news that old Elizabeth is sitting on the nest at last. What Gabriel says next is **the second thing** for us to remember, no matter what else we might forget:

³⁷*"For nothing will be impossible with God."*

The impossible in this story includes Medicare picking up Elizabeth's prenatal, labor and delivery costs, and the impossible includes a virgin conceiving and bearing a child. Elderly Elizabeth greets the impossible with praise; teenage Mary welcomes it with amazingly uncomplicated, complete trust:

³⁸*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

*Yes, I see it all now:
I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve.
Let it be with me
just as you say. (The Message)*

The shorthand for Mary's answer to Gabriel is the Latin word "*Fiat.*" "Let it be."

So on this very brink of Christmas, I invite you to take a holy moment, put yourself in pre-pregnant Elizabeth's sandals, and ask, "What good thing have I despaired of happening in my life?" Then repeat the beautiful angelic mantra: "*...nothing will be impossible with God.*" "*...nothing will be impossible with God.*" "*...nothing will be impossible with God.*"

Or maybe you're not sad about what **hasn't** happened, but you're puzzled about what **has**: especially something that was beyond your control, that you didn't invite to happen, but it just did. In those instances we can channel young Mary, asking the Holy Spirit to fill us with complete, uncomplicated trust that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Then we can take a prayer stance of faith-filled surrender, repeating Mary's mantra, "Let it be with me according to your word." "Let it be with me according to your word." "*Fiat.*" "Let it be."

If you get tired of waiting for an answer to your prayer, remember what Gabriel said, on God's behalf: "*Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time.*" Mary's son, Emmanuel, God-with-us, arrived on time – in God's time. Every other answer to prayer will arrive on time – in God's time.

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

Then the angel left her.

³⁹⁻⁴⁵ Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

*You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!*