

A Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent  
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December 20, 2020

*When the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."*

*But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16*

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38*

Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. God is bringing forth new life in you. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, inspire you, and guide you to do wondrous new things; for nothing will be impossible with God.

Do we really believe that? Is it easier to believe this happened to a young girl in Galilee all those centuries ago than to believe that it could happen now to us? Is God done interrupting people's lives to use them to change the world, or might God still be doing things just like this?

If I say that each one of us has found favor with God, even though God knows about our mistakes, our regrets, our negative thoughts, and everything else we would rather God not know about, can we believe it? And if I say that God also knows our potential, our capacity for love, and our worthiness and wants to change the world through us, can we believe it?

Mary was a teenager, an ordinary girl, living in a small town in an occupied state, betrothed to a man named Joseph. Having an angel, a messenger from God, appear to her and tell her she was favored and that the Lord was with her was not exactly a daily occurrence in her life. Mary was understandably perplexed and afraid. Hearing that she would be giving birth to a child, Mary asks, "How can this be?" Her question is not surprising.

Isn't that the same line of questioning and response we have when God sends messengers to us?

Our messengers appear in the form of family members, friends, or complete strangers. They speak to us through books, movies, and dreams. We hear them in worship, in prayer, and when we read scripture. The messenger says, "God has noticed you and is calling you to help change the world." Well, maybe not exactly *those* words, but we sense God prompting us to consider something new, something different. Almost always, it is unexpected. And most of the time, what is our response? Uhm... no, I don't think so. I don't want to do that. Not now, maybe later. I'm just an ordinary person. I can't make a difference. I don't have enough education. I'm not good enough. I'm too old. I'm too young. I'm too busy. How can this be? It's simply not possible.

Whenever angels appear in the Bible, they always say, "Fear not." Probably because they know we prefer the familiar, and how afraid we are of change. When an angel appears, he's probably not calling us to sit in front of a fire with a cup of tea, a book, and a warm blanket. When messengers appear, they challenge us and call us out of our comfy chairs and into action. Prophets can have much the same effect.

Hearing our first reading from Second Samuel, we might have wondered what in the world it has to do with Advent, with Mary, with the coming of Christ.

When King David shared with the prophet Nathan his grand plans to build a house for God, God made it clear to Nathan, who then told David, that God had no need of a house. God had long moved about with the people of Israel in a tent and a tabernacle, accompanying them every step of their journey through the wilderness. God was not cooped up in a church on the hill. And God promised Nathan and David he would continue to be with the people, leading them forward. Moreover, God declared that he would make David a house! This seemed impossible to the people of Israel and they eventually built a temple anyway. They were not yet ready to imagine that God did not need a building.

Mary was ready to imagine. When the angel told her the Son of God would be within her, she asked, “how can this be?” The angel told her it would happen because she was favored by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. She said yes even though she knew that her life would be forever changed by the presence of Christ within her. This was something new, something different for Mary, who had believed God resided in the temple.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent we always hear a version of the story of how the angel Gabriel comes to tell Mary and all of us that nothing is impossible with God, and that God will be with us, Emmanuel. Even when we cannot be together in person for worship, God is present with us, for God doesn’t need a temple or a church building to do impossible things. When we have said yes to God, God is present in us, preparing in us a mansion for himself.

In the twelfth month of 2020, yes, even in 2020, a messenger was sent to a church in Petersburg called Christ and Grace. The people were not sure Christmas would happen since they could not worship in their building. The messenger appeared and said to them, “Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you.” But they were much perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The messenger said to them, “Do not be afraid, people of Christ and Grace, for you have found favor with God. You are not able to be together in person, but the presence of Christ is within you and connecting you to one another spiritually and through the miracle of YouTube!”

And they said, “How can this be, when we are not able to worship in God’s house.” The messenger said to them, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, in every place where you are, and the power of God will fill you, and you will be the bearers of God’s love to the world. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

This world is changing. God is changing this world. Our lives are filled with seemingly impossible things right now. May we trust that God is with us and within us, wherever we are, calling us into a deeper relationship with Christ, and calling us to new ways of serving others both in and out of our building. Will we say “yes” to that power unfolding within and among us, believing that it is possible to effect the change we long for in this world? Will we believe that wherever we are, God is there?

Like Mary, may we say, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.