

NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Just as happened on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent, with their focus on John the Baptist, today, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, our Gospel text confronts us with another great figure who asks to be considered for her own special significance: Mary, the mother of Jesus. Once again, we are asked to stop and listen and wait, before the fulness of Christmas comes. John the Baptist called us to turn, repent, to do what is necessary before Christ comes again. Mary calls us to embrace the truth that the new reality towards which we turn is something that, with God's intervention, **can come into being**: "... nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37), the angel Gabriel tells her; to which Mary answers, "let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) In the verses following our gospel, Mary rushes to the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist, and Elizabeth exclaims, "...blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:45) So again, John the Baptist calls for a turning; Mary believes that God will make that towards which we turn possible.

So, what does it mean for us today to have the faith of Mary – to believe that in the face of what seem to be insurmountable problems *nothing* will be impossible with God? Let's use climate change as an example. The New York *Times* ran an article last week entitled "Shift to a Not-So-Frozen North is Well Underway, Scientists Warn." (NY *Times*, Dec. 8, 2020) "There is no reason to think that in 30 years much of anything will be as it is today," says one of the editors of an annual climate assessment quoted in the article. The Arctic region is moving from a climate that is characterized less by ice and snow and more by open water and rain." This is especially poignant in this time when the imaginations of children are focused on a snowy North Pole and the comfort and security of that imagery, of warmth and abundance and gifts coming from the magical place of perpetual cold. As you have heard me say before, it challenges me as a parent to be both truthful and hopeful about the reality of climate change. And you know that I feel called to repentance for my own participation in the forces that are driving it.

But if I stop and listen to Mary, my focus shifts. For Mary, God is the God of an amazing new reality, a future she could never have imagined. And remember, she is a teenager, barely older than my own daughter! Imagine hearing, and *embracing*, these words: "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." (Luke 1:35) Could the world possibly have changed more for Mary in that moment? She, a virgin, is now pregnant with God's own Son. Could the future of the world possibly have changed more?

There is no adequate describing of the magnitude of this truth that Mary is asked to believe and digest. There is no possibility that she can imagine what it will mean or how it will unfold. Yet she believes. She believes that nothing will be impossible with God. She embraces the unimaginable future God has given her and goes forward believing that it belongs to God, and that it will be good. Mary is asked to give up any sense of control over her future, completely and utterly. She says, with absolute accuracy, "Here am I, *the servant of the Lord*;" and again, "let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

Are we really being asked to live into an unknown any greater than the one Mary was given? I don't think so. Many have noted that climate change spells the end of anything that might be called "nature." Scientists increasingly embrace the idea that we now live in a new geological epoch – the

“Anthropocene,” in which human impact on geology and ecosystems defines the shape and trajectory of those systems. Others, though, sound the cautionary note that in the great scheme of things, 5,000 years of human history hardly qualifies as an epoch. (Peter Brannen in *The Atlantic*, August 13, 2019). Just for one example, the age of the dinosaurs lasted 180 million years! For another, the great cycle of continents coming together into supercontinents and breaking up again has continued over billions of years of geological time. On the grand scale of the story of God’s Creation, human interference with the unfolding of things is literally just a blip on the screen.

God’s breaking into human life – the miraculous thing Mary is asked to comprehend – is much larger than any human influence on God’s Creation. The author of the unimaginably vast cosmos of which we are a tiny part has chosen to come and join *us*. We can know that Divine Author in the person of Mary’s baby. And with her, we can know that with this Divine Author, nothing will be impossible.

So: are we faced with daunting problems? Surely yes. Is God larger than those problems? Again, surely yes. We are not going forward alone into the complexities that face us. Perhaps God will show us not the end of nature, but a new nature yet to be fully revealed and understood. So on this last Sunday in Advent, before the great inbreaking of Christmas, let us stop and say with Mary, “let it be with us according to your word.”