

The Impossible

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

Luke 1:26-38



Mary's "How can this be?" is transformed to "let it be..." as Gabriel speaks to her of impossible possibilities. For all the drama of the scene, of this annunciation, it strikes me that it all comes down to something we all know – trust.

I am taken with the first question asked of those of us who are ordained as elders. We do not ask, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" or "Do you submit to Jesus Christ?" or "Do you agree with, or promise to obey, or assent to certain doctrines about Jesus Christ?" No, we ask, first, this one question, the question that grounds all the others:

"Do you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ your Savior..."

Trust lies at the root of it all. Both the words "trust" and "faith" come from the same Latin word, "fide." To have faith in, it seems, means, simply, to trust.

Much of the reason, it seems to me, that we honor Mary, even though we do not go as far as our Catholic siblings do in that honoring, is her trust. Gabriel comes to her not as a cute little angel fit for decorating the bathroom wall, but rather as the messenger of God bearing a disruptive word. And Mary is afraid. Angels in the Bible are not cute and cuddly. They are fearsome. We know this because they almost always say what Gabriel says here – "Do not be afraid."

I suspect part of the fear angels inspire is the knowledge that when one walks in the room, things are about to change. The angel is the embodiment of God's word, and God's word brings newness and life, to be sure, but also a radical in-breaking, which often requires trust that all that is possible, settled, routine, and expected can give way to the impossible, unsettling, new, and unexpected.

I read last week in the Washington Post an opinion column written by George Shultz, who was the Secretary of State under President Reagan in the 1980's, and before that worked as Secretary of Labor and the Treasury. Shultz is now 100 years old, and he

wrote the column in part to reflect on his life, and to sum up what he thought was the key to a good and productive life, whether personally or politically.

He writes, “I learned early and then re-learned over and over: Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust was in the room, whatever room that was – the family room, the school room, the locker room, the office room, the government room, or the military room – good things happened. When trust was not in the room, good things did not happen. Everything else is details.”¹

I would add one more room to Shultz’s list – the church room. The mark of a vibrant and healthy congregation like this one is trust. Pastor’s and staff that trust the people, people that trust leadership, a staff team that trusts one another – this is the key to life abundant in a community of faith, precisely because we are a community of faith, which is to say a community of trust. Our life flows as it were from the same fount that compelled Mary to say, “Let it be with me according to your word” – trust.

It is easy for any one of us, or whole communities, to allow mistrust to enter the room, to lose faith, literally, in one another or in our leaders or even in God. Sometimes mistrust is justified by the failures of others to be trustworthy and sometimes it emerges from a heart that has been so battered that trust becomes almost impossible, a hardening of the heart to protect it from being broken. Whatever the reason, however, when cynicism and mistrust become a way of being for individuals or for communities, I fear Shultz is right – good things do not happen. We never move beyond “How can this be? To “Let it be.”

The good news that greets us this day in the words of Mary is that God will not give up on our failures of trust. The womb of Mary holds the very life of God taking flesh – sinews and bones and blood and a beating heart – because of God’s love. We cannot really separate those two things, the love of God for us, and our love in response, which ushers in trust. It strikes me that it is Mary’s love, at last, that brings trust into her room. It is not a sentimental love and trust, to be sure, for this Mary will sing very shortly of a God whose love will scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and bring down the powerful from their thrones. It is a love and trust that makes all things new, that makes all things possible.

When I first became part of the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee and was being examined for membership, I had been warned that there was a retired minister named

¹ George P. Shultz. *The 10 most important things I’ve learned about trust over my 100 years*. Washington Post, December 11, 2020.

Gudger Nichols who always asked the same question: “Do you love Jesus?” I remember after being asked about the doctrine of predestination I silently prayed that Gudger’s question would be next, because it was easy to answer. And his question did come next, but something about its context, standing in front of a community of faith, just becoming pastor of a new church, you learning how to trust me and me learning how to trust you; the weight of the question landed on me as if it wasn’t Gudger at all asking, but Gabriel the disruptive messenger of God – “Do you love Jesus?” It wasn’t easy at all to say yes; perhaps it never should be so easy to just slide off the tongue, to put on a bumper sticker or a billboard, for in that one question is the life that is life. Everything else is just details.

In Sue Monk Kidd’s book, “The Secret Life of Bees,” the protagonist, Lily, becomes part of a little group called “The Daughters of Mary.” It is 1964, and this group has gathered liturgically around a statue that has been passed down from the time of slavery. They called her “Our Lady of Chains, not because she wore chains, but because she broke them.” In one scene, the leader of the group takes her hand and places it on Lily’s,

“...and she moved her free hand on top of it, so we had this black and white stack of hands resting upon my chest.

“When you’re unsure of yourself,” she said, “when you start pulling back into doubt and small living, she’s the one inside you saying, ‘Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are.’ She’s the power inside you, you understand?”

“Her hands stayed where they were but released their pressure.”

“And whatever it is that keeps widening your heart, that’s Mary too, not only the power inside you but the love. And when you get down to it, Lily, that’s the only purpose grand enough for a human life. Not just to love – but to *persist* in love.”²

The gift of this Fourth Sunday of Advent, when we lit the candle we call love, is the opportunity to hear again the good news that God’s love grew in Mary’s womb for the sake of the life of the world, to embrace that word, and to trust it enough to let it order our days, that we might persist in love and be agents of God’s newness. Love and trust might seem far away in these days, an impossible dream. But let us not be afraid to trust, because nothing shall be impossible for God. Amen.

² Sue Monk Kidd. *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 288-289.