

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

December 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26-38

All in the Family: Mary

She was young and, no doubt...well...ordinary. Just a young girl with her life ahead of her. Perhaps she daydreamed about the carpenter she planned to marry...the wedding, their home, their life together, and at some point children. She surely had a lot to look forward to.

I wonder if she heard him coming, or if he simply appeared. He, of course, being Gabriel the angel, bringing her a life-changing, world-changing message from God.

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. 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. (Luke 1:28, 30-31)

And her response is typically read with a calm respectful tone, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" But I wonder if it was more like, "You have got to be kidding me!!! There is NO WAY!"

I don't know if we can wrap our minds around the fear that must have churned inside her. Fear of what people would think, fear of what would happen to her body, fear of Joseph's response, even rejection, fear of death (which was the consequence for adultery).

This was NOT good news for her. We're told she was perplexed - some Bibles say troubled. Yeah! No kidding! Her fear, understandably, was in the way of her receiving this as a blessing. Her human mind could not understand how this could happen to her, or to anybody, for that matter. Who ever heard of a pregnant virgin? Indeed, how could that be?

Truly, Mary found herself in an unbelievable situation. I mean, if ever something were impossible, this was it! I'm sure she meant no disrespect to her heavenly visitor, but I'm also sure she had to double-check - just to make sure he was aware that, biologically, there was no way such an event could occur. But then you know, that is precisely what makes a miracle, a miracle.

There have been times when I too have been afraid, so afraid, that all I could say was, "How can this be?" Times when the fear was so thick I could not see through it - I could not imagine any good thing on the other side - I couldn't even imagine that there might be another side for that matter!

When I was in my late 20's, the young man I thought I would marry broke up with me. Six months later I was diagnosed with depression; it was another 4 or 5 after that before I could start praying again; and another 3 or 4 months after that before I could imagine a life without him; and another few months after that before there was more joy than sadness on balance...

Mary's question was my question, "God, how could this be?"

There she was, pregnant through no fault of her own. Thrown into an embarrassing (and life-threatening) situation, by none other than God Himself. God isn't supposed to put us in a bind. He's supposed to get us out of them!

But then, who are we to say that Mary was really in a bad situation? After all, we humans (including Mary) often have a hard time seeing beyond our fear.

But listen again, to the first words out of Gabriel's mouth when he greeted her:

*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.
And some Bibles add, Blessed are you among women!*

As God's messenger - and that's what angels in the Bible are...messengers from God - he spoke God's message. And God's message to Mary was one of favor, and blessing: Mary, you are amazing! And then she was given a special and unique purpose; chosen to do something that would change the world, something that no one else on earth will ever again have the privilege of doing; chosen to become honored above all other women. Amazing!

And with all this comes something else - something essential - the most important thing of all. She also received a promise. And we do too. And it's the promise that enables all of us to endure even the most difficult, most desperate, most fearful circumstances:

The Lord is with you.

Isn't it true that the assurance of God's presence always makes us stronger? Isn't it true that, when we can say, "The Lord is with me," confidence begins to bubble up inside of us?

When God calls us blessed, and when we know He is with us, even the seemingly bad situations take on purpose and become clothed in grace. When impossibilities line up in front of us like a firing squad, we've got to somehow get to the point that we can quiet our own souls enough to hear Him whisper, "I think you are amazing; and I'm right here with you."

And if we can't quiet the chaos enough to hear it, then we can read it in the Bible. All over the place God says,

I will not leave you nor forsake you. (Joshua 1:5)

Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9)

And if you don't have the strength to play seek and find with the Bible, then find someone here - your own Gabriel - who can speak these words into your heart and your life for you.

When the car won't start and the children won't behave;
When the refrigerator breaks right before Christmas;
When your marriage is falling apart and it seems there's nothing you can do;
When all you can see is a disease, with complications mounting;

These are moments to remember His word. Those are times tailor made for Romans 8, which says,
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (v.38-9)

It is often said that God has a plan. But sometimes I wonder if it isn't more helpful to believe that God has a **promise**. That somehow - God will take all the different pieces: situations, experiences, challenges, lessons - somehow God will fit them together to make one beautiful picture called your life.

God is much more interested in seeing that the whole of your life works together for good, than He is in making sure that every circumstance is pleasant and that we lie down in a bed of roses every night.

You know as well as I do that struggle is a part of life. No doubt there are times when you have asked, "How can this be?" But if you have walked with God any time at all, you also know that when He speaks, He acts. You know that what He says, He does.

God's promise is true. And if we're still flinging our "Yeah, buts" back at the Gabriel, we need to read to the end...

For with God, nothing will be impossible. (Luke 1:37)

Those words brought Mary to the turning point, and her heart was able to believe them. Fear fled. Questions ceased. Confidence came.

And courage resounded in her response: (v.38)

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

I wonder what you are facing this Christmas season.

I wonder what is causing you to ask, "How can this be?"

I wonder what fears are causing you to wonder if you'll be able to make it though.

Know these two things:

God presence: The Lord Is With You

And the promise: For with God NOTHING is impossible. Nothing!

Amen.