

**12.24.23 Advent 4**

**Love over Fear**

**Luke 1:26-38**

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We're looking forward to having our son Greg and his wife Marci arriving in Brewster tonight to be with us for several days. One of the courses Marci took this semester at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary was about Christian writer and thinker C.S. Lewis. Some of you may be familiar with his books including *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It's an engaging story I first read when I was in elementary school. For those of you who may not know the story, it's about four siblings, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, growing up in England during World War II, but it mostly occurs in the land of Narnia which the children discover through the back of a large old wardrobe. Narnia is under the curse of the white witch and is in a 100-year winter. It's always winter, but never Christmas and the creatures that dwell in Narnia live in fear, despair, and hopelessness. There doesn't appear to be any possible way the situation will change until ...well you need to read the book or watch the movie.

Some of us may feel like we're living in Narnia; that where we live it is always winter, but never Christmas. We may be blanketed with grief over the loss of a loved one and the loneliness that so often accompanies grief. Looking around at all the terrible things happening in the world we may shudder in despair of things ever getting better or be frozen in fear of what kind of world our children and grandchildren may live in. Those of us in the winter of life may feel hopeless over our physical condition or that of someone near us. One of the women in today's gospel reading was feeling that way.

In today's Gospel lesson Luke mentions two women who are at vastly different points in life. Elizabeth is in her old age; she's been happily married for a long time, but her greatest disappointment is that she never had a child and there doesn't seem any possibility that she will. For her it has been winter, but never Christmas and the gift of a child. Mary is a young unmarried woman with her life in front of her who suddenly is confronted with a potential future she never imagined. **Both women are surprised by God's possibilities and are asked to choose love over fear.** Listen to **Luke 1:26-38**,

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 entering he said to her,

*“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.”

There are several ways of approaching this passage. On one level, we must acknowledge that some people can't get past the idea that it's a conversation between an angel and a young woman because they don't believe there's such a thing as angels, so they don't think the whole scene is possible. Some people can't conceive of a way a woman could possibly conceive a child other than the way babies are normally made so **an angel** talking about that possibility is doubly impossible to believe.

It's not my purpose this morning to debate either of those things. We all have our own assumptions, thoughts, biases, and perspectives. However, I believe if we can humble ourselves and accept that God's Word has the power to teach us spiritual truth and if we're willing to enter the world of the story, as the children were willing to enter the world of Narnia in C.S. Lewis's story, there is much we can learn.

**One of the important things we learn from overhearing the conversation of Gabriel and Mary is the importance of choosing love over fear.** Every day there are forces both inside and outside of us that want us to give in to fear, anger, doubt, hostility, and suspicion. But this is not the response or the manner of living that God desires for us or from us. In the encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary, who is a young woman likely in her teens, we see the response God desires as Mary

courageously chooses love over fear and makes herself available to serve God's hope for the world.

This is the third appearance of the angel Gabriel in Scripture. The first time was with Daniel (8:16). The second time is earlier in Luke 1 with Zechariah who is a priest serving in the Temple and Elizabeth's husband. To Mary, Gabriel's greeting was one of gentleness followed by words to relieve Mary's fear and anxiety. Gabriel comes to Mary with a message that sounds impossible to believe. We typically focus on Mary, but have you ever wondered how Gabriel felt about delivering the news? Perhaps Gabriel had some fear of his own that he had to overcome in delivering the message.

Frederick Buechner's little book of character sketches of people from the Bible, *Peculiar Treasures*, has this to say about the angel Gabriel as he encounters Mary: *"She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl."*

In a way, we're in the same position Mary was all those years ago. We're asked to decide for ourselves whether nothing will be impossible with God. Is God limited by our understanding, our comprehension, our experience, or are there all kinds of possibilities with God, possibilities expressed in Paul's prayer in **Ephesians 3:20**, ***"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."*** Each of us decides what our approach to life is going to be. We can be skeptical, cynical, and doubtful. We can be trusting, hopeful, and obedient. That choice is up to you to make.

There's something about Mary that teaches us about love and possibilities. **Possibilities with God begin with being available to God.** In saying, ***"Here am I,"*** Mary, a young woman, is echoing the words of two of Israel's greatest prophets, Samuel, and Isaiah. As a boy, Samuel was ministering under the priest Eli at a time when the word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread. One time when Samuel was about 12 years old, he was lying down in the temple, and he heard the

voice of the Lord calling him repeatedly (1 Samuel 3:1-10). At first, he didn't know it was the Lord, so he kept on saying, *"Here I am!"* and reporting to Eli who sent him back to bed. After the third time, Eli realized the Lord was speaking to Samuel, so he instructed him to say, ***"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."*** The Lord spoke to him and gave him a difficult message, but Samuel was faithful to proclaim it. As Samuel grew up everyone came to know that he was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord and no one in his day had greater influence than he did – because his mother and father had dedicated him to the Lord and from the time, he was young he made himself available to God.

In a comparable way, the prophet Isaiah was in the temple when he had a vision of the Lord and heard the voice of the Lord saying (Isaiah 6:1-8), *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* And Isaiah replied, ***"Here am I; send me!"*** Like Samuel, the message Isaiah was given to speak was difficult to share because it was a word about the disaster that was coming upon God's people because of their disobedience, injustice, corruption, and lack of care for the poor, but it included the promise that God would preserve a remnant with a future. Hope was not completely lost.

Mary is asked to serve God in an amazing way, even more so than Samuel or Isaiah and her response is, ***"Here am I."*** If you'd like to experience God acting in powerful ways in your life, then like Samuel, Isaiah, and Mary, you need to be available to God. There are some things that are within our control that open us up to God's love and God's possibilities. Opening our life to the Lord by regular times of worship, reading God's word, listening to Christian music, sharing time in prayer, doing our work with our eyes and ears open to the Lord speaking to us, serving others – these are all ways of making ourselves available to God. Gabriel tells Mary she has found favor with God, she is special. If, on the other hand, we're engaging in habits or practices on a regular basis that are not pleasing to the Lord, we shouldn't be surprised that we don't sense the Lord's presence or hear the Lord's voice.

**If being available to God is the first step to choosing love over and fear and being open God's possibilities in our life, the second is being a servant of God.** God is not likely to do something as dramatic in our lives as God did through Mary; however, Mary is a model of love, faith, and obedience. When she asks how all that Gabriel says will happen, the divine messenger concludes by saying, ***"For nothing will***

***be impossible with God.***” Mary’s brave response of love, humility, and availability is that of a true disciple. It’s her response that opens her up to the possibilities that God has for her, ***“Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”*** We’re going to hear next Sunday from several BBC folks how being willing to serve God can be transforming in our lives.

**The idea that nothing will be impossible with God is expressed twice in Luke’s Gospel** once to Mary who is a poor young woman. The other time is in **Luke 18:18-27**, when a wealthy ruler comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. He had wealth, power, reputation, and influence, but he lacked what Mary possessed – a loving, humble servant’s heart. Jesus invited him to be one of his disciples and to come with him, but the man chosen not to because he was possessed by his possessions. Jesus makes it clear in his ministry that he came as a servant saying that he ***“came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*** Paul writes in **Philippians 2:6-8** how Jesus *“though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross.”* Like the son she would raise, Mary humbled herself and identified herself as a **servant of the Lord** and **made herself available for God’s purpose.**

**If the first step in choosing love over fear and experiencing God’s possibilities in our life is being available to God, and the second is being a servant of God, then the third is believing the word of God.** God is still looking for people who will say to the Lord: ***“Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*** God is looking for loving people like Mary who are **available** for God’s purposes: who are trusting, hopeful, and obedient, whose self-understanding is that of a **servant** of the Lord and who believes that God can do through people what seems to be impossible.

People who don’t know what’s impossible often accomplish what is unthinkable. George Danzig was a senior at Stanford University during the Great Depression. All the seniors knew they’d likely be joining unemployment lines when the class graduated. There was a slim chance that the top person in the class might get a teaching job at the university. George was not at the head of his class, but he hoped that if he were able to

achieve a perfect score on the final exam, he might be given a job. He studied so hard for the exam that he arrived late to take it. When he got to class, the others were already hard at work. He was embarrassed and just picked up his paper and slunk into his desk. He sat down and worked on the eight problems on the test paper; then he started on the two written on the board. Try as he might, he couldn't solve either of them. He was devastated. Out of the ten problems, he had missed two for sure. But just as he was about to hand in the paper, he took a chance and asked the professor if he could have a couple of days to work on the two on the board he had missed. He was surprised when his professor agreed.

George rushed home and vigorously plunged into those equations. He spent hours and hours, but he could find the solution for only one of them. He never could solve the other. It was impossible. When he turned in the test, he knew he had lost all chance of a job. That was the darkest moment of his life. The next morning a pounding on the door awakened George. It was his mathematics professor, extremely excited, shouting, *"George! George! You've made mathematics history!"*

George didn't know what his professor was talking about. The professor explained that before the exam, he'd encouraged the class to keep trying despite setbacks and failure. *"Don't be discouraged,"* he had counseled. *"Remember, there are classic problems that no one can solve. Even Einstein was unable to unlock their secrets."* He then wrote two of those problems on the blackboard. George had come to class late and missed those opening remarks. He didn't know the problems on the board were impossible to solve. He thought they were part of his exam and was determined that he could solve them. And he solved one! He did the impossible. That very morning the professor made George Danzig his assistant. He taught at Stanford until his retirement and was the inspiration for Will Hunting in the movie, *Good Will Hunting*.

The possibilities with people are still unknown; the possibilities with God are unimaginable. Mary has the courage to believe God's word to her and the faith to act in response. She stands in a long line of faithful people who in their own time may not have been understood or accepted, but who but who believed the word of God and were loved and used by God.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Among other things, Poor Rudolph feels different from everyone else from the time he's young. He's not accepted by his father; he's teased by the other reindeer his age, if the program was made today, he'd be in therapy. He's told "*even among misfits you're a misfit.*" He feels unloved for much of the story as do all the toys on the island of misfit toys like the Charlie in the Box.

Rudolph first appeared on TV in 1964. So many folks wanted to know what happened to the poor toys on the island of misfit toys that they remade the ending for the 1965 showing to include Rudolph returning to the island. You know the story. The toys are afraid they're unloved, forgotten and it seems all hope is lost for another year. I've been watching that scene my entire life and I still get teary eyed because I'm sentimental and because it echoes the truth that God loves us, and God has sent Jesus to rescue us from our islands of isolation where we feel like unloved, unwanted misfits.

The Lord can come to us in our despair and hope can emerge for the future and for possibilities with the Lord and with our sisters and brothers in Christ that we haven't imagined. God loves you. You're not forgotten. God has a place and a purpose for you.

Possibilities with God begin with choosing to live in love rather than fear and **being available to God, being a servant of God, and believing the word of God.**

Love is why God came. Love is how God came. Love is still how God is revealed and dwells among us now. Love must be allowed to overwhelm our fear.

You have all been a source of God's love to our family for years and we're so thankful.

I pray that love abounds for you this Christmas, and you're treated with love by those closest to you and that you share love freely with others. I pray love becomes or remains the guiding principle in your life.

I pray that whenever we're given the choice between fear, control, legalism, or love, we'll choose the love every time.

**Blessing: Faith, hope, peace, joy, and love all abide, and the greatest of these is love.**

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is one of your favorite Christmas movies or programs? What is it about that story that appeals to you?
2. What do you think Mary was feeling and thinking during her encounter with the angel Gabriel? What do you imagine Gabriel was thinking?
3. Gabriel appears to Zechariah (Luke 1:5-23) and to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Both respond to Gabriel by asking *“How...?”* What do you think was different in how they asked their question that led Gabriel to respond so differently to the two of them?
4. In what surprising or overwhelming circumstances have you experienced God’s faithfulness and favor?
5. How does Mary’s willingness to be available to God’s plan, even at considerable risk, represent choosing love over fear?
6. Why is it important to believe, *“For nothing will be impossible with God.”* What might become possible for God to do in and through you if you answered God as Mary did, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”*