

Luke 1: 26 - 38 Surprise # 1
Newtonbrook United Church - Advent 1, 2009

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Greetings favoured ones. The Lord is with you!
Yes. God is with you and, as Jesus was fond of saying, your faith has made you whole.

Now I am not pretending to be the angel Gabriel who surprised Mary with the words, "*Greetings favoured one. The Lord is with you.*"¹ At the same time, the message is that God is with you and your faith can help you on your journey through life because, as the angel Gabriel said to Mary;
*"For nothing will be impossible with God."*²

Luke's Gospel encourages us to see that if Mary can play such a significant role in God's story for the world, so can we. Mary, you see, is like some of us. When greeted by the angel Gabriel she is "perplexed." That is to say, puzzled, mystified, bewildered. Who? Me? Favoured?

I can imagine Mary saying I'm just an ordinary, poor peasant woman. There's not much in my life that anyone would say that I have been given special treatment.

From our perspective, after the fact, we know that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus because she was an ordinary, poor peasant woman. That's how God often seems to work in this world. God has what theologians call a "preferential option for the poor." While God loves everyone, there is a special place in God's heart for those who are suffering - suffering in any way - in God's world. Let us remember that the rich also suffer and that there is a burden of wealth that can destroy the soul.

In the story Mary wonders how she might be able to be the mother of Jesus. When God calls us to our ministries - and we all have a ministry as a consequence of our baptism - we too wonder HOW can I do this?

*"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*³ says Mary. Gabriel assures Mary, and us, with the words that; *"For nothing will be impossible with God."*⁴

¹ Luke 1:28

² Luke 1:37

³ Luke 1:34

⁴ Luke 1: 37

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There is a Celtic parable that addresses the faith required of Mary, and of each of us. It says a lot about how we have been given the gift of love to be shared in God's world, but we often do not see our own gifts, or we lack faith. Like Mary, we are called to do something, but there is something within us that holds us back and we forget that, with God, nothing is impossible!

The Celtic parable is called, The Absent Ferry⁵ goes like this:

One evening a priest was standing on the bank of the River Shannon waiting for the ferry to take him to the other side. A man came to him.

"Father," the man said, "the ferry is a long time coming. I am in a hurry to get home as my child is unwell. What should I do?"

"If I knew what to do I wouldn't be here myself." the priest replied.

"But there must be some way I can get home," the man persisted.

"How many times have I said from the pulpit that if a person has faith they can do anything?" the priest said.

There was silence. The man felt he had irritated the priest. Still the ferry did not come. Both men began to suspect that it had stopped for the night. Then the man spoke again.

"Is it really true that a person who has faith can do anything?"

"Of course it is," the priest snapped back.

The man stepped out into the river and walked across it.

Notice that the parable says he, "walked across it", not that he walked on the water.

"The greatest darkness is beneath the lamp itself," the priest said to himself. And he went off to seek an inn where he could stay the night.

This is an old oil burning lamp. It shines light when it is needed. We shine light into God's world through sharing our gifts and the love that God has put into our hearts. I know that there are many times in my life when I have been like the priest in the parable, or maybe like Mary in the gospel. Surely you don't mean me God! I am not the favoured one. The priest said to himself, "*The greatest darkness is beneath the lamp itself.*"

Theologian Dan Hotchkiss says that;

*"Everything about our spiritual lives depends on whether we develop basic, fundamentally, nonrational trust."*⁶

⁵ Celtic Parables by Robert Van De Weyer, page 113

⁶ Dan Hotchkiss, Congregations, Summer 2004, p. 40

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Not all of us are called, like Mary, to be the mother of Jesus. However, we are all called to share the gifts that we have for God has given a variety of gifts to each of us. We are indeed the favoured ones!

When we remember that, WITH GOD, nothing is impossible, our faith grows and our ministry grows. Few of us are called to be the great prophets; the wondrous healers, the famous speakers, but ALL of us are called to carry out the promises that we make at the time of baptism.

Our lives are located at the intersection of Faith and Society.⁷

Can there be a better message in life than the assurance of God's presence, AND the assurance that, with God, nothing is impossible? Are you surprised?

Singing together # 68 in Voices United - All Poor Ones and Humble

Questions for Reflection:

1. Can faith be contrasted with fear? In which house do you choose to live?
2. When were you recently fearful about believing?
3. In what area of your life do you need to believe that nothing is impossible with God? What keeps you from believing this?

⁷ Allan Baker, personal journal, July 17, 2005

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Prayers for God's Family and Creation;

God of Grace,

together we turn to you in prayer, for it is you who unites us, inspires us, and enables us to do your ministry.

You are the one God, Creator, Redeemer and Holy Mystery. we believe in you and we know in our hearts that we are not alone.

Open our hearts to love, we pray, and see that all people are made in your image.

We gather this morning in a time of great turmoil when:

- our sisters and brothers, and their children, live with hunger as an unwanted guest in their homes
- our hearts are heavy when we contemplate that December 1st is World AIDS Day, and we know of the suffering that could be prevented, or alleviated
- we know that war persists, and that there are ways in which we are complicit in these wars, even as we pray for peace
- the natural environment in which humanity and the creatures of the earth live is threatened because of carbon emissions

Loving God, our hearts go out this morning in particular to:

Keith and Velma McGregor and their family and friends

Marion Ross in St. John's Rehab.

the Woodrow family who are grieving the loss of Kathleen Woodrow

and those whose names are written on our hearts

God, with you, nothing is impossible. We offer these prayers in hope, and in commitment to following your way. Amen.

V.U. #34 Come Now God of Peace