



Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church
Austin, Texas
18 December 2016 – Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sermon – “Nothing”
Mark Ramsey

Luke 1:26-38
Luke 1:47-55

When they teach someone to stand watch at sea,
you are WARNED: DON'T focus on one spot for too long.
Look all around, because you might miss what is obvious.

Pay attention to what you see out of the corner of your eye—
--it's more sensitive.
What you cannot see directly in front of you,
you may see out of the corner, first---not clearly, mind you,
but just a hint of it there...
...when you look out on the horizon.

At sea you can easily be fooled.
You look out on the ocean in the daytime and think:
"I could see someone in the water a mile away."
But you CAN'T.
Not even in a bright orange raft.

You look at a ship and think, "That's maybe 500 yards away."
But it's not---it's five miles.

Distances FOOL you...

When you are at watch at sea--you have to be careful
to look in EVERY DIRECTION
and consider EVERY HINT of possibility...

Even if I had wanted to get up here this morning
and make a fuss about the over-commercialism of the season--
—IT'S TOO LATE!

...The angel Gabriel is already here,
with a startling,

totally disarming announcement.

In this text, God's truth is conveyed
 in a STRANGE way, by our standards,
 but this announcement follows
 the standard pattern of Jewish scripture:

*--The angel appears;
 --the person being visited reacts (often in fear);
 --the person is REASSURED.*

*--The BIRTH is announced;
 --the One to be born is NAMED;
 --the child's future is predicted.*

*--An OBJECTION is raised;
 --a final reassurance is given;
 --and the word is ACCEPTED...*

**And from there, it all comes upon us so quickly
 and with warm familiarity:**

*The decree from Caesar Augustus,
 the trip to Bethlehem,
 the NO vacancy sign at the inn,
 the angel,
 the shepherds,
 Joseph and Mary,
 the swaddling cloths--*

**The challenge of Christmas for us is to locate—*anew*—
 --where this story has REAL POWER for us.**

***Beyond tradition or sentiment:
 where do we encounter God?***

There is good reason for holy messengers in the Bible
 to constantly announce their appearance
 with the assurance: ***“Don’t be afraid!”***

Why would they have to say that if there were not good reasons,
 in fact, to be VERY AFRAID?

Why rush to say: ***“Don’t be afraid!”***

if everything was, in truth, so familiar?
 The truth to which Mary bears witness is this:
 this is good news that unsettles our known, settled world.

This is a word from God—which is constantly in jeopardy
if we are NOT on watch,
if we are not prepared
to LIVE it and not just observe it..

In fact, we often eschew watching and waiting for some
 BOLD ANNOUNCEMENT from God,

and INSTEAD--live with a kind of emotional
 and spiritual mediocrity:
In order NOT to feel too bad about our life,
we can't feel too good about it either...

...rather than EXPECTING the world to be broken into
 with a WORD so overpowering,
 we need constant REASSURANCE from the Holy One--
 --we have INSTEAD become pedestrians,
 never straying far from
 the SAFE and KNOWN!

There are TWO points, especially, in Mary's song
 that stop of us our tracks,
 that leave us wondering if God's power
 can really gain traction in a world like ours.

The first is a nagging suspicion we have about these words:
"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty..."

Every economist from Milton Friedman's disciples to Paul Krugman
 have strong opinions about this—
--but how about Mary?

Mary's Magnificat comes into December, 2016
and finds a very fractured world.

And there's a conventional script
 when it comes to preaching about wealth and power in church.

A whole bunch of people will think it's wonderful,
it's about time,
and maybe even use words like "prophetic."

And then another bunch of people will think
*"It's naïve, it's intrusive, it's inappropriate,
you can't just take poetic words
from a first-century teenager
and translate them artlessly into
a social or economic program."*

A few years ago, Sam Wells, Dean of the Chapel at Duke
made a suggestion in regard to this that I'd like
to put alongside the *Magnificat* this morning.

Rather than choosing between hearing the *Magnificat*
as POETRY...or POWER—
--perhaps there is ANOTHER WAY to live into this text.

**So, in the light of the season and the gift of this text,
I invite you to have a conversation with someone
over the next few days.**

Wells suggests that if you are feeling uneasy about the topic,
have this conversation with someone
with whom you feel very comfortable.

If you're feeling a little more bold,
try having this conversation with someone
from a different place in society to yourself.

Here are the four parts of the conversation you might initiate
with one other human being,
within the echo of the *Magnificat*:

Tell me about the ways in which you are rich.

Tell me about the ways in which you are poor.

Let me tell you about the ways in which I am poor.

Let me tell you about the ways in which I am rich.

...That's it—the basis for a conversation in light of Mary's song.

Having that conversation—

"For NOTHING will be impossible with God."

Here's this unwed, teenaged mother

from a part of the world few powerful people even cared about.

And an angel comes to her and says the Holy Spirit is upon her
and she will bear the child of the Most High God.
And she doesn't even laugh or look for the hidden video!

She ends up saying:

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be..."

WHO does she think she is??!

"For NOTHING will be impossible with God," that's WHO!

Here is Joseph.

What Mary told him about what the ANGEL had told HER
went against all the law of Moses
and his own cultural tradition.

According to Matthew, when Joseph heard about Mary's pregnancy,
he considered what it might mean...

CONSIDERED IT??

A closer translation leads us to say
that he was ENRAGED by what he heard—
--but nevertheless, he acted with compassion,
AGAINST all religious and moral expectations!

What is Joseph all about? ***"...For NOTHING is impossible with God."***

Here are these SHEPHERDS.

Tossed out of a boring, normal evening by an Announcing Angel,
backed by an angel army...

You know, AFTER their Bethlehem experience,
the shepherds apparently felt no need to rush off
to seminaries or monasteries.

It's funny--the scriptures never again mention

any of the shepherds, as far as we know.
 But, I'll bet that wherever they were
 and whatever they did from that night on--
 --their lives echoed with the sound of:
"NOTHING is impossible with God."

How do we BECOME Mary's song?

How do we live in the PEACE of a world where
 poor and rich meet each other as equals,
 and the lowly and the mighty join hands to bring justice
 rushing down like a mighty river?

We begin by singing the refrain of the angels:
"For nothing will be impossible with God."

THAT message needs to be declared from every mountaintop!
 This needs to be the church's creed today as never before.

We should recite it often--NOT ONLY at the manger,
 But to everyone tangled up and trapped in Gaza,
 and South Sudan, and Aleppo,
 and on dust bowl farms,
 and shuttered factories.

"For NOTHING will be impossible with God" is the word...today...

...To Vladimir Putin and Teresa May
 and Angela Merkel and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf;
 ...To Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell
 and Nancy Pelosi and John McCain;

To Raul Castro and Mahmoud Abbas, Bibi Netanyahu;
 To Pope Francis and Aung San Suu Kyi...
 ...and Hilary Clinton and John Roberts
 and Barack Obama And Donald Trump.

"For NOTHING will be impossible with God" is the word...today...

To each single parent struggling to get to tomorrow,
 and to every child growing up in the bleak world of poverty.
 To the child orphaned in Malawi and
 to the teen dodging explosions in Syria;
 To every person struggling with a bad diagnosis,
 a long string of unemployment,

a shattered family,
a hopeless situation...

ANYTIME anyone suggests to you that the problems of our world
and the predicaments of our life
are too complex,
too hard,
too daunting
and absolutely BEYOND SOLUTION--

--We can say it tenderly, we should say it gently,
but we need to believe boldly:
"NOTHING will be impossible with God!"

For everyone trapped in a life-destroying addiction--
they need to hear, LOUD and STRONG:
"NOTHING will be impossible with God!"

For all of us, who, from time to time get caught up
in making that DULL BARGAIN--
*--in order NOT to feel too bad about life,
we promise NOT to feel too good about it, either:
there is another word:*
"NOTHING will be impossible with God."

When you start really sharing—the riches of your life
and the poverty of your life—
and when you listen to the poverty and riches of another;
and when you find JUSTICE illusive,
and PEACE invisible—
--say out loud: **"NOTHING will be impossible with God."**

We watch for signs on the horizon of the coming of God.
Don't focus on just one place:
a church, or a home, or even a manger...
...Hope is closer than we think.

In our lives, when you catch, even out of the corner of your eye,
the slightest glimpse of the IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENING--
--you will know that THERE--Christ is being born.

Watch everywhere, because our faith tells us
that the IMPOSSIBLE is happening all the time.

When the IMPOSSIBLE happens--you just say with Mary:

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

Are you letting God turn you into Mary's song?

"...NOTHING is impossible with God..."

Amen.

¹ Sam Wells, "Does She Mean Us?" Duke University Chapel, December 20, 2009