

Sermon for 20 December 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalter: 199 Luke 1:46b-55 "Canticle of Mary" (Magnificat);

Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

"Impossible."

Let's sum up the spiritual points of this short, four week season we're completing today, the season of Advent. We start in the dark many times. Then, we hope. And finally, even in despair and disappointment, comes joy ...sometimes almost overwhelming.

So, summing it up, not fully understanding is not so bad as an attitude. Letting go of certainty is kind of like flying, or sailing, even in some ways like making love ... even with God. Listening is in tune with Nature.

Even if we're in charge, at home, or at work, to some degree, when things are happening to you, or your family, or our city, or the world, or our time in history, that seem so out of control, so scary ... think back to these points we've made in December. Apply them. Make good use of them, so that the God of all times and places who is among us, and within us, and up ahead of us, can converse with us, and we can learn, for the first time, and the one hundredth time, what living well really looks like, and how it plays out, in the Bible, all the time, behind the scenes, and right full in our faces. Working with God has lots of Advent moments. Hearing God in the darkness is healing, and revolutionary, and amazingly healthy.

Now remember: In the darkness, we're sometimes confronted with what seems impossible. The Bible has been saying this over and over. In story after story, people of faith are confronted with facts we would call "Impossible!" We moderns work around what we call the facts, and the old folks called Nature, until we think we understand And then, as with global warming, what was there all the time, but we ignored in our haste to control and own and make over in our image, stuns us again.

The popes in the fifteenth century produced what they called the doctrine of discovery. What it meant, as we were learning to sail and to shoot big time, was that humans could steal and kill and enslave and colonize all we wanted. (They called it saving the natives and taming nature). So now, when what our ancestors never even imagined is now normal to us, like indoor plumbing, and talking to anybody anywhere and any time, and looking up the facts about anything, and producing vaccine within less than a year for a worldwide pandemic...and yet, still, we're not satisfied. Instead, we're scared. We're still trying to rule, take over. We keep on insisting it's impossible to live in peace and equality with our neighbors, and be in harmony with Nature as a whole.

Indeed the scientists sound much more moral than we religious folks these days, and the people who developed the atomic bomb push harder than we to do something honorable and trustful of God's creation.

Today we hear the scripture saying nature works WITH us more than FOR us. It starts with God's refusal of David's offer to build a dwelling for Jahweh. Instead, we hear a story of courage far beyond what a young teen-aged girl is expected to have. Today Mary's acceptance is paired with another old, childless woman's surprise and joy, such as the Bible has told us more than once already ... and we are left speechless. This is not the way we expect things to work. This is impossible!

Might a poor young woman guide us out of the fix our world is in? And are the elderly, and the poor, the dark, ... the most of us, in a word ... Are these where wisdom most often lies? Is this male dominance of our religious thinking, our creeds ... Is all that going to fade farther and farther away?

Surely the message to us this final Advent Sunday is harsh and bold, even in its maidenly beauty.

"The way we're headed is the way of death. The seed that falls into the ground and dies will not spring to life unless we honor and follow the ways of our Mother Earth. "

In the midst of all the dreadful destruction of first century Jerusalem by the Romans, one message came alive in two ways to those who still survived. The Jews became a people of Torah, of the Book, organizing their whole approach to faith without temple sacrifice; and the small sect of Israel gathered around the experience of Mary and Joseph and their son Jesus became a fellowship on its own, believing, as St. Paul puts it today, "God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ...to all the Gentiles..."

Impossible!

To believe in our own way, and yet to share with all the other great faiths, the news that the world is one, God is in all things, and that this is good, and incredibly hope-filled...

This is the message that we learn and teach, and that God through Jesus uses us to practice among all the peoples of the earth, and all the creatures, and the planets, and in life, and in death, and in all things in Advent, and all year.

God, help us practice what we preach, through Jesus Christ, all the time, everywhere, through the Spirit you give us so powerfully, as we come together each week, and as we minister in our various ways day by day, at home and abroad.

Amen.