

“HOW CAN THIS BE?”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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2nd Sunday of Advent

Psalm 89:1-4

Luke 1:26-38

Last Saturday, there was a wedding in this room – a big wedding. I worked with the couple getting married for about six months, planning every last detail of that wedding. If you’ve ever gotten married or helped to plan a wedding, you know that there are a zillion details to which you need to attend, and of course, every bride and groom (bride, particularly!) wants the wedding to be perfect.

Well, in fact, weddings are never perfect. Something always goes wrong. I tell all of the brides and grooms with whom I work to relax, something always goes wrong. Usually, it’s nothing very big, but something always goes wrong – and yet, the wedding still goes on, the bride and groom still get married, and everything turns out okay.

To make them understand that, I’ll tell them a story or two from my experiences with weddings over 30 plus years of ministry. Like the several times, three I think, when I asked for the rings and they were nowhere to be found. One had flown off the maid of honor’s hand when she pouffed the bride’s train. We found it underneath a pew. Another where the best man had mistakenly left the rings in his car. No worries – I just told him to take his own ring off, and we used that for the wedding, and blessed the real one later.

But those were small potatoes compared to these doozies! One year, early in my ministry, I was sitting in my office waiting for the wedding to start, and one of the bridesmaids came running in sobbing hysterically and announced to me that someone had spilled red kool-aid on the train of the bride’s dress! I’m not kidding. Well, I solved that by having said bridesmaid go to the nursery and get some baby powder, and after patting the big red spot as dry as we could, we doused it with powder and off the bride went down the aisle, with no one the wiser.

That was about as exciting as the time when, at the very end of the wedding, just after the bride and groom had lit the unity candle on the altar behind me, and I was pronouncing the benediction, the bride suddenly gasped and pointed. One of the candles had come out of its holder, rolled down the parament on the front of the altar and was laying on the carpet, still lit! Without skipping a beat, I kept saying the benediction, turned around, picked up the candle, put it back in its holder,

turned back around, finished the benediction, whereupon the organist began to play the recessional, and off went the happy couple into wedded bliss.

So, you see, things happen. Something always goes wrong. But you know what? All of those things I shared with you pale in comparison to what went wrong in today's pre-wedding story in the Gospel of Luke.

Let's go back and hear it again. Mary, dear, sweet, young Mary, was in the months leading up to her wedding to Joseph. In all probability, the match had been made through her parents, and by all accounts, it was a very good match for the both of them. Joseph was a carpenter, a man older than Mary, with a good profession who would be able to make a good life for her and with her. All things were on schedule – they were betrothed, and looking forward to that day when they would enter into the holy covenant of marriage. Surely, like all young women planning a wedding, Mary was excited, and couldn't wait for the day to come. And surely, the community was excited too, as word spread of their betrothal.

And then, something went wrong, big wrong! At least it sure looked that way, when one night Mary was visited by an angel named Gabriel, who told her that the Lord had found favor with her and she was to conceive and bear a son.

No, this wasn't the plan. No, she was going to marry her Joseph, and somewhere down the road they've have a child. But now, this angel was telling her it was going to happen sooner rather than later, and it wouldn't be of Joseph. I'm surprised Mary didn't collapse to the floor upon hearing those words.

Instead, she said, "How can this be?"

Those are the words she uttered, but oh, how many more words were probably swirling around in her head and heart. How can this be? I'm supposed to be getting married to Joseph. What will he say? What will my parents say? What will the community say and think of me? How can this be? Everything was in order. All the plans were going along smoothly. Now I feel like the rug's been pulled out from under my feet, everything's crazy. How can this be?"

How can this be? It's the same question her cousin Elizabeth likely asked a few months earlier. Elizabeth's story is told in the verses of Luke 1 just before Mary's. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, was married to a man named Zechariah, and she was considerably older than Elizabeth – considerably. She and Zechariah had been married a very long time and their marriage was happy, save for one thing. They were never able to have a child, and it wounded them both deeply. They saw people all around them having children, and it broke their hearts that they hadn't had that blessing. More than that, they had to endure the pity of others, and from some others, they had to endure those thoughts that swirled around in that day and age

that God was punishing you for some reason – and that’s why you didn’t have a child.

But time had gone on and on, and somehow Elizabeth and Zechariah locked that pain away in the recesses of their hearts as best they could. Until one day, when the rug was pulled out from under them as well, when an angel appeared to Zechariah to tell him that, in their old age, with Elizabeth well past child-bearing age, they were finally going to have a child, a son to be called John.

You know, they both had to have been thinking, “How can this be? After all those years, after those years of month after month disappointment, and after finally coming to terms with being childless, how could this be? Now, in their old age, having a child?”

Oh, surely they asked the question differently than Mary. Mary asked it in shock and uncertainty. Their question was uttered with tears of joy running down their cheeks, knowing that their long-uttered prayers had finally been answered.

“How can this be?” A question that rises up when things don’t make sense, or things happen we don’t expect, or things surprise us. A question that probably all of us have asked at one time or another in life.

I remember asking that very question earlier this year when I got the call from the President of Wesley Theological Seminary telling me I had been chosen to receive the Society of John Wesley Award for Excellence in Ministry. I may not have said those words exactly, “how can this be?” it was more like “Are you sure?” It was so overwhelming, and I felt undeserving of the recognition.

Some of you, I know, have asked the question “How can this be?” when after a long time in a settled life, something came along to disrupt it – the loss of a job, the break-up of a marriage or relationship, a sudden transfer to a new location, and so on. Everything that you knew to be normal was suddenly going to change, and your head swirled. “How can this be?”

Sadly, too many here this year have asked the question in the midst of devastation and loss. “How can this be?” Bankruptcies, disease, car accidents – so much sadness that changed life completely for too many of you. “How can this be?”

Which is often followed up with, “What am I supposed to do now?”

Mary’s head had to have been spinning. What in the world was she supposed to do now that everything was turned upside down? Elizabeth too. What in the world am I supposed to do with a baby at my age? Help me, Lord.

Well, the answer to their questions and to all of ours is one word and the word is “God.” Turn to God. Trust in God. Know that he will make a way.

Against all odds, in spite of the fact that her life was going to go way differently than she planned, Mary, after being reassured by Gabriel, that God would be with her through the Holy Spirit, said “Yes.” She walked in that new direction and God did make a way. Joseph stayed with her, he said “Yes” as well, and God walked with them every step of the way, on a journey that changed the world forever.

He walked with Elizabeth and Zechariah as well, granting them the dream of their lives – to be parents. And their child was John, whom we know as John the Baptist, who led the way for Jesus.

And friends, he walks with us as well, always and ever, but never more closely, I think, than when we find ourselves shaken and bewildered over the turn of events in our lives, when we are filled with questions and uncertainty. Then it is that he holds us close and walks with us, day by day, into the future.

No matter what questions and struggles arise in our lives, friends, the answer is always God.

So, if you have come here today and are facing an impossible situation, or a situation that had pulled the rug out from under you, know that it wasn’t an accident that you were here today. Perhaps you were meant to hear Mary’s story again. Perhaps you were meant to be reminded that, no matter how overwhelming things may seem, no matter how your plans have been turned upside down, no matter how entrenched the problems you face may seem, God is bigger than all that, and as Luke said, “nothing is impossible with God.” Like Mary, trust in the God who has been faithful in the past, to be faithful with your future too, and to make a way where you can’t see it just now.

Rest in his arms, and trust that he will take you to that place, where you, as Mary did, will be able to sing a new song, and know the peace that only he can give. May it be so.

Amen.