

“DO NOT BE AFRAID: II – TO BELIEVE THE IMPOSSIBLE CAN HAPPEN”

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2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1:5-13, 26-37

If I asked you this morning to name the most memorable song from a movie or Broadway show, what would it be? Some of my young friends here might say, “Let It Go,” from Frozen. Someone else might say “Bring Him Home” from Les Miz. Others, like me, might suggest, “Climb Every Mountain” from the greatest movie ever (at least in my opinion), “The Sound of Music.” But there’s one more that I want to remember today and it’s from the show “Man of La Mancha,” and if you know that show, you know I’m speaking of the incredible song, “The Impossible Dream.”

Its words are powerful:

“To dream the impossible dream,  
to fight the unbeatable foe,  
To bear with unbearable sorrow,  
to run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong,  
to love pure and chaste from afar,  
to try when your arms are too weary,  
to reach the unreachable star.”

One of the characters in this morning’s Gospel lesson, a woman named Elizabeth, is dreaming what appears to be an impossible dream. Actually, she had been dreaming it for a long time, but finally gave up on it. Her dream? To be a mother.

Happily married to Zechariah for years and years, the one thing that tarnished their life together was their ability to bear a child. From early on, from in the early days of their marriage, that was surely on Elizabeth’s heart – a deep desire to have a child with her husband. Yet month after month, they were disappointed – and then it turned into year after year. And somewhere along the way, when her body showed signs that the time had come when having a baby was not going to happen, that dream truly became impossible, and Elizabeth tucked that

sadness away, but it was always a dull ache in her heart. She found a way to rejoice when other women in her life had children, and she loved them as a beloved aunt, but no doubt, there were days when she returned home after being with them and the tears of sadness and deep disappointment fell. Elizabeth's impossible dream.

Ah, but there's another impossible situation in today's Gospel lesson and that involves Elizabeth's cousin Mary – and I'm going to call her situation for the moment an “impossible nightmare.” Think about it – Mary is a teenager, betrothed to be married to a good and kind carpenter named Joseph. Everything is all set, her parents have arranged everything. She and Joseph are engaged, and plans are underway for their wedding, and their future home, and everything looks bright and gay – and then, one night, Mary gets a visit from an angel, and at first glance, everything falls apart!

The angel tells her that God has chosen her to bear a child by the Holy Spirit – his child – who will be the Savior of the World. It's too much to hear, and Mary realizes that it will be catastrophic for her and those she loves. Joseph will never believe that she didn't cheat on him! What's to keep him from breaking the engagement and heading for the hills?

And how will her parents react? Will they believe this incredible story, or will they turn her out, leave her on her own? She could almost hear the gossip mongers going at it, see the averted eyes and the hushed tones of people speculating about her condition. Worse yet, she could be stoned for her alleged sin of getting pregnant out of wedlock.

How could this be happening? What in the world was God thinking? How could it be that Gabriel said this is a blessing? On first glance, from all outward appearances, this looks like an impossible nightmare, doesn't it?

Have you ever found yourself facing, what looked like, an impossible situation? If you've lived any length of time at all, I would imagine you might have. A time when things were so bad, so dire, that you didn't think they could ever be worked out.

Perhaps it was when the person you loved dearly betrayed you and broke their covenant with you.

Or maybe it was when you walked into work one day, and within an hour were being escorted out because your job was eliminated.

It might have been when you or someone you loved hit bottom with an addiction, and there seemed to be no way out.

Or maybe you had an impossible situation exactly like Elizabeth or Mary – you were unable to conceive, or you had a child out of wedlock.

And, if you've been blessed such that you've never faced an impossible situation personally, you are still part of the human family that has faced impossible situations like some we're facing now –

Terrorism around the world,  
War and rumors of war,  
Political fighting to such an extent that nothing gets done  
Ever increasing shocking acts of violence  
Opioid addiction running rampant in our country

Whatever the impossible situations we face, personal or global, it would be easy to throw up our hands and give up. Like Elizabeth and Mary, we might wonder, “Can this be healed? Can something good come out of bad?”

The answer is yes. As children of God, people of faith, we know that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, with God all things are possible, and that God can make a way even when we can't see it.

We trust that because we have seen him do it again and again and again. Look back at today's Biblical story. Wonder of wonder, miracle of miracles, Elizabeth – well past the time when biology said her body was able to bear a child – did become pregnant and bore a healthy son, whom she and Zechariah named John – later known as John the Baptist, who we know, did incredible things himself to prepare the way of the Lord. Her pregnancy made absolutely no sense – at least in the human way of thinking – but God had something else in mind – and made the impossible possible.

And Mary – dear Mary – said yes to God's invitation, and her impossible nightmare was not a nightmare after all. Joseph didn't turn his back on her, instead put his arms around her and walked with her on their holy journey. Her parents didn't shun her, she wasn't stoned. She carried that precious baby and bore him into a world that he would save by his life and his death.

If God can do that, what can he not do, for the world, and for you and me. So, if today you're facing an impossible situation, do not be afraid, God can turn it around and make it right. Trust that. He's done it in the past, he can do it now.

The other thing that is important to remember about God making a way in impossible situations, is that very, very often he will use human beings to help make it happen. God actually used Elizabeth to make Mary's dream a reality. It was her encouragement that helped Mary say yes to God's invitation.

Someone put it so beautifully once – “When God’s power is met with a willing and surrendered heart, the impossible becomes possible.”

Remember that lovely children’s story we heard a few moments ago – look at the amazing things that happened because people answered God’s call for help. Those in need, those who shivered in the cold because of thread bare clothes, who may have thought things would never get better for them, suddenly found warm clothes, good shoes, coats and jackets and mittens, and food for their stomachs because people answered God’s call to help. God started to turn their impossible situation around through willing people.

Are you willing to be one of those people who helps guide make impossible things happen? No doubt, like Mary, we might be scared, but once again, the word from the Gospel for us is “Do not be afraid.”

The wonderful writer Barbara Brown Taylor puts it like this:

“In this divine dance we are all dancing, God may lead but it is entirely up to us whether we will follow. Just because God sends an angel to invite one girl onto the dance floor is no guarantee that she will say yes. Just because God sends a prophet to tell us how life on earth can be more like life in heaven does not mean any of us will quit our day jobs to make it so. God acts. Then it is our turn. God responds to us. Then it is our turn again.

The only thing that is absolutely sure in this scenario is that we have a partner who is with us and for us and who wants us to have life. Mary’s trust in that fact is really all she has. What she does not have is a sonogram, or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that says, ‘The child really is mine. Now leave the poor girl alone.’ All she has is her unreasonable willingness to believe that the God who has chosen her will be part of whatever happens next – and that, apparently, is enough to make her burst into song. She does not wait to see how things will turn out first. She sings ahead of time, and all the angels with her.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Singing Ahead of Time,” *Home By Another Way*, p. 18)

Mary doesn’t know how things will turn out, but she trusts that God will make a way – and he did. When we face impossible situations, may we, like Mary, trust, and dance with God to make dreams come true and impossible situations possible. And through it all, come what may, may we trust in God and not be afraid, knowing he is with us through it all. Thanks be to God!

Amen.