

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 14, 2014

The Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

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*Send us your spirit, God, to open our hearts and minds to your word,
and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus name. Amen.*

"In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you'" Luke 1:26-28

Life is full of surprises. Sometimes things happen, it seems, out of the blue, things that we had not expected, things that renew our energy and that give us a new focus in our journeys. I think, for example, how I was nicely settled at St. Mary's Church planning to remain there until full retirement. I was enjoying my work, the people of that parish, and there was a predictable routine for my days. Life was good. Then came a conversation initiated by the bishop about the possibility of my becoming the interim rector of what I was told was a nice parish out here on Hermitage Road whose beloved rector was called to a position in the diocese. As things came to pass, I found myself over here with you all in this fine parish. Just a few days ago, I said to Jeannie, "How can this be? How could I have been so fortunate as to land at Epiphany at this time in my ministry?" Life is full of surprises and many of them are ones in which we find joy and pleasure. New friendships can result from any number of circumstances. Think for a moment of some of the surprises that have brought you joy or, perhaps, a renewed sense of purpose in your life.

Then sometimes, there are surprises that bring us challenges and we might wonder how we are going to manage our way through to a solution to such a challenge. Perhaps it is something in the work place where we face a complicated problem that needs a solution. We find ourselves initially asking, "How can this be?" How did I ever get into this situation?

And then, there are those surprises that turn our lives upside down. It could be in the form of a diagnosis that we had not expected, or the loss of a loved one. Our life is forever changed and we wonder how we will ever make it. Our initial response to that invasion into our life is, "How can this be?"

A collective cry of anguish is raised when calamity or catastrophe befalls a nation, a community, or a school. We all remember where we were and what we were doing when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas that fateful day of November 22, 1963. In anguish and in shock we wondered how this could possibly be? On September 11, 2001 we were in disbelief. How could this be? On December 14, 2012, the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut elicited the same cry of anguish of how could this be?

That reverberating refrain shapes our faith as life reminds us of how much is hidden from us. We become aware that for good or for bad we are never fully in charge of our destiny. Startling news—be it joyful or sorrowful—frequently evokes from us the question that Mary voiced in the gospel reading this morning when she was told that she was to bear a child who would be the son of the Most High whom the Lord God would give both divine and human authority. As the angel Gabriel spoke to her with that news her immediate response was, "How can this be since I am a virgin?"

In today's gospel we hear once again the beloved and familiar story. An angel appears as if from nowhere. A young girl who is a virgin learns from the angel that she will defy nature and she will bear a child. That same angel tells of yet another occurrence beyond the possibility will happen. Another woman, well beyond her childbearing years is soon to deliver her baby. The stories of these two births are full of mystery and wonder. Beyond the mystery, however, the story that surrounds these two births gives courage and affirmation to us in the midst of life's quandaries and questions.

We see first of all that Mary's reaction to the angel Gabriel's visit is at best cautious. And no wonder. Here she was of humble beginnings. She lived in a remote town far from the religious center of Jerusalem. She had no idea whatsoever that she would be destined for a singularly distinctive role. There is the human tendency that we all have to think that leading unassuming lives in out-of-the-way places isolates us from the extraordinary. The choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus reminds us that things that happen are unpredictable and that we are not fully in charge of our own destiny. When we are startled by news—whether it's joyful news or whether it's sorrowful news—we find ourselves asking the same question Mary asked when she was given the news that she was to bear a child who would be the "Son of the Most High."

But listen once again to what the angel said to Mary as soon as he approached her. He said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Yet even as he spoke, she was perplexed and the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary."

On this fourth Sunday of Advent as we now come close to celebrating Jesus' birth and the gift of Emmanuel—Emmanuel meaning the Lord is with us, we live with the promise that the Lord, as he was with Mary, is with us in all that life brings. As the angel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary, and in those moments as he visited with her, she began to comprehend that her life, and not only her life but the whole world's was about to be rearranged. She began to realize that nothing would be impossible with God. Her response to the angel Gabriel was simple and affirmative, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Perhaps Mary's words bring God's Christmas wish to us, that as followers of Christ you and I can believe nothing is impossible with God. Perhaps these words of hers as we take them to heart will invite the Holy Spirit to work in us making it possible for us to face all that life brings our way and to do so with hope. May these final days of Advent prepare you in some helpful and meaningful way to find strength and peace in your life and may we await with joy the birth of our savior on Christmas Day. *Amen.*