

FOR NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

The Rev. Ted Pardoe
Grace Church in New York
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2011

The Rector declared that last Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, would now become a new feast day on Grace Church's calendar, the Last Sunday of the Scaffolding. Let's enjoy a moment to exhale this morning and simply soak in the grand feel of getting this meaningful portion of the sanctuary back in use for our worship. For those of you who are visiting Grace Church today for the first time, what a difference this past week has made since last Sunday. May these restored windows, walls, and ceilings beckon us all further into the beauty of holiness.

What a divine way to connect to the Advent themes of anticipation and joy in expectation of the anniversary of the nativity of our Lord. Especially having spent several weeks in preparation and repentance with John the Baptist, channeling Isaiah, "in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Now Christmas is one week away and we have the birth of Jesus foretold to Mary and all of us in the annunciation. We are prepared to live once more, the Greatest Story Ever Told. The announcement of the Incarnation by the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary. Sheer joy and glorious expectation about the nativity. Yet with this abundant joy and expectation probably comes some amount of uncertainty or anxiety for which we should be heartened and empowered by the final words of the angel "For nothing will be impossible with God." Indeed, upon hearing these words, Mary consents to the miraculous plan that she has just been made part of.

You may gaze up at Grace Church's stained glass window that represents the Annunciation right there in the south transept chancel. I believe that a few minutes of meditation on the window with the light coming through the stained glass can truly inspire us about the truth of this critical pronouncement "For nothing is impossible with God."

Let's indeed reflect a bit on today's gospel story. We hear quite a candid and personal conversation between the angel Gabriel and the virgin Mary. The point of Jesus' lineage connecting to the house of David is quite minimized. Just a quick comment about Joseph's role in that regard. This story is all about Jesus' mother, Mary, in a divine conversation. We actually learn very little about her. Just before today's gospel passage about the announcement of the incarnation, we may read several verses that are dedicated to telling us about the parents of John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Luke writes that they were longstanding experienced people, righteous and religiously prominent. They would appear to be a power couple in the social and religious spectrum. But they face the social stigma of being without any child at all.

On the other hand there's Mary. We know virtually nothing about her. We may surmise that she was young, the virgin description would suggest as much, and likely of limited means if not outright poor. Let's recall the patriarchal nature of that society as well. Mary was likely a marginal figure. What is Luke up to here? Holding up a woman on the edge of society as the mother of the Son of the Most High? The angel Gabriel is gentle with Mary. When an angel was telling Zechariah of the impending birth of his son John, Zechariah was so skeptical of the divine message that the angel had to make him mute until John's birth. Not so with Mary and her conversation with Gabriel. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary was perplexed. The angel assures her and seeks to comfort her. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Mary gains a bit of confidence but she's still puzzled about human reality as she knows it. She says to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel

offers the grand announcement about the wonder and miracle of the Holy Spirit, adds in the news of Mary's relative, Elizabeth, also overcoming her barrenness, and proclaims for all of us "For nothing will be impossible with God." Mary says, in what I interpret as a serene reply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Just as Jesus came among us as one who serves, his own mother recognized in her conversation with the angel Gabriel, how each and every faithful follower of God in Christ is called to be a servant of God and of one another.

Luke is presenting a rather preposterous picture. In a Jewish world that valued age and male experience, the Son of God is announced as coming by way of a poor young woman. What a way to emphasize the truth of the statement that keeps welling up before us "For nothing will be impossible with God." What a grand annunciation. Present among us today in the iconic stained glass window right there. The nativity of Jesus foretold on this final Sunday of Advent, our season of preparation for the coming of our Lord.

I ask that you bear with me for a moment as I wax nostalgic this particular Advent season. I gaze back across twenty five years when Helen and I were married right here in April of 1986. By Advent that year we were sitting in a pew right over there by the north aisle expecting our first child. We have been thoroughly blessed over ensuing years to have been here in three subsequent Advents awaiting the arrival of our three additional children, all now fine young adults, if I say so myself. Then I reflect on the wonderful series of events in my own faith journey that took me around the city before allowing me to return here to Grace Church as a priest a couple of years ago. Returning to the here and now, I am pointed right to the joys I have experienced with the scores of infants, children and adults and all their families who we as a clergy team have baptized into this body of Christ very much seeing the Holy Spirit at work here at 10th & Broadway. Just last Christmas there was our baby girl Jesus "Martha" and the search is still on to see which of the fourteen infants baptized on All Saints' Sunday will be in the manger this coming Christmas Eve for the pageant. Still exciting details for which to stay tuned!

But back to the Big News gospel story before us. This miraculous and, at the same time, paradoxical story presented by the evangelist Luke. While I was mulling over some initial thoughts about this sermon a couple of mornings ago, neglecting my calisthenics, a strong cup of coffee in one hand, the New York Post sports page in the other, the headline shouted "Scrooged." Mets fans are facing another sad Christmas. As a Yankees fan, I didn't need to read on. However, the reference to Charles Dickens' lead character in A Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge, did catch my attention. I certainly have that story fixed well in my Christmas repertoire, like a great number of us I imagine. However, I will confess, Helen's and my favorite feel good Christmas entertainment is still White Christmas. When our young adults heard that we had watched it the other evening, they breathed a sigh of relief knowing that they wouldn't be subject to a forced viewing if we had already taken it in.

The story of Ebenezer Scrooge's visits to Christmas past, present and yet to come is a very vivid and emotional tale of personal revelations and ultimately of re-assessing one's ethical conduct toward others focusing on the meaningful Christian celebration of the nativity at Christmas time. It is fairly evident there is a back story in the way that Charles Dickens was aiming to tell a story about injustices and inequality that surrounded him in the middle of 19th century England. He was a passionate voice about the topic of poverty having had some harrowing experiences himself around poorhouses. As a young person, Dickens' own father ended up in one of London's notorious poorhouses. Instead of writing additional polemical pamphlets about the matter he wrote his deeply-felt Christmas narrative. I did not appreciate until recently that Charles Dickens had travelled to America to see firsthand some examples of the conditions of the poor and laborers such as miners. He was also a personal friend and

colleague of our great American writer, Washington Irving. Irving's first well known book, written under the name Diedrich Knickerbocker, *A History of New York*, included a critique of colonialism and the treatment of native Americans. Both of these superlative authors were also social critics with a view to creating a new aura around Christmas. Both the niceties and joys of the holiday and an awareness of the surrounding social realities.

This connected me back to Luke's gospel and the annunciation. The very next thing that Mary does after her visit from and conversation with the angel Gabriel, is to sing out her great hymn the Magnificat. We certainly hear loud and clear in Advent the voice of the prophet Isaiah proclaiming God's love of justice and bringing good news to the oppressed and binding up the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61). Well the blessed Mary in her own song praising God confirms some divine truths and our Christian ethical imperative. You will hear the choir sing it out too in just a few minutes. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things (Luke 1:51-53a).

In the joy of the Christmas season and the arrival of the Son of the Most High, there exists the gnawing reality that there is still much to do to spread the kingdom of God today. Such was the tension that existed when Jesus came into the world to offer us salvation and witness to his way and God's way. As we celebrate this Advent and Christmas season it is most heartening to know that a great many folks here at Grace Church are reaching out to others both within the parish and beyond. Just yesterday a group of people volunteered to help at the GO Project holiday party bringing some joy to the hard working students and their families.

There are so many people who volunteer to see that our worship life proceeds right here in these services. There is a wonderful buzz among the young adults in the parish looking for new ways to reach out and help others. Whether it might be new possibilities with the GO Project, taping and painting with Habitat for Humanity at one of their New York City sights, or just serving as an overnight host in the First Presbyterian homeless shelter.

Such was the spirit of Christmas past as Charles Dickens and Washington Irving sought to remind people about our need to be mindful of the condition of others at all times even or especially at times of great joy. As we celebrate this Advent with Christmas a week away, may we be inspired to be even more prayerful and active members of the body of Christ. We may do so with the knowledge that as the angel Gabriel said to Mary and Elizabeth, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

AMEN