

“Impossible Things”
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38
December 18, 2011, Fourth Sunday of Advent
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Dr. Catherine Taylor

One of my favorite songs growing up
was Rogers and Hammerstein's "Impossible" from the musical Cinderella.

It names things that are clearly impossible:

a pumpkin turning into a carriage

a scullery maid marrying a prince

mice turning into horses;

then it turns its own assertions upside down in the refrain:

But the world is full of zanies and fools

Who don't believe in sensible rules

And won't believe what sensible people say

And because these daft and dewy-eyed dopes

Keep building up impossible hopes

impossible things are happening everyday!

“Impossible” is the kind of hope-filled song that most of us love,
especially children.

Yet a study done this year has shown
that even children as young as four

can tell the difference between improbable things
and impossible things that happen in stories.

They know that stories are stories,

and can make distinctions about what is and isn't possible.ⁱ

How about you? Would you have believed it?

If anyone had said to you five years ago
that an uncontrolled mortgage market

would bring the world economy to such near collapse,

that three years later we would still be suffering the repercussions

If someone had suggested this time last year that an Arab Spring

would sweep through the Middle East

and topple decades of rule by strongmen

in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya, would you have agreed? .

Who in this room last December thought
Osama Bin Laden would be discovered soon, and pay for his actions,
that an earthquake would crack the Washington Monument,
and the US lose its AAA rating primarily because
its government would be judged incapable of action? Impossible.

What is possible and what is not
is at the heart of both our readings today.

In the reading from Samuel, David has an itch to build.

He is finally settled in a house fit for Israel's king,
but the ark of the covenant remains in a tent.

The contrast strikes him as all wrong,
so he wants to build a house for God.

Whether or not concern for God's honor
is David's true motivation we don't know.

It could be that he has secret longings
to be remembered as the king who built the Temple.

We don't get to see any deeper into David's motivations
but we do see this most successful of Israel's kings as an operator.

His worrying about God still living in a tent
is done out loud in front of the prophet Nathan.

Now, in other stories Nathan is a capable and honorable prophet,
but here he is awfully fast to rubber stamp the king's plan.

"Go do all that you have in mind," he says.

"For the Lord God is with you."

The idea, the presentation, the approval
all happen in the space of about 60 words, three short verses.

It could be that this much too fast assent
is here to warn religious folks in later times
not to be too quick to go along with the church administration.

Because that same night God shows up to tell Nathan
that his quick response to David was wrong.

"Go tell David the word is 'No!' says God.

"I never asked for a house and I won't accept one now.

Such a plan is impossible, for I have a plan of my own."

God tells Nathan there will be building, but not of a house for God.

What will be built is a *people* for David.

God's house can wait.

David's house and kingdom will be established forever,
and it will be God's doing.

It's worth remembering that David was not worthy
of such a gift on God's part.

David had done many ruthless things to arrive in the palace.

If you haven't read that part of the story in a while,
sit down tonight with Samuel and make yourself a catalogue
of the men and women David used.

God is not rewarding David for anything.

God is acting out of an impossible love
that isn't based on what David deserves.
It is based on what God desires.

Centuries later on another night in another town

God sets the plan in motion.

A young girl learns that she is carrying a child
who will fulfill the promise about David's house.

The girl is greeted by that most mysterious of creatures, an angel.

I was once asked to teach a class on angels at an Atlanta private school.

The students were all high school kids,
savvy, hip, wealthy, well-educated.

The class was an elective, so they were there by choice.

"Tell me what you know about angels," I asked them.

After a little pause someone offered "wings,"
then "flowing robes," then "halos," and on and on
until all the standard criteria were listed on the blackboard.

"Where did these ideas come from?" I asked,

opening the door on the possibility
that the Bible has very little to do
with what we think angels are like.

Then we looked at the few texts to see what we could find,
including this one since it involves

a meeting between an angel and a teenager.

We say this story took place at night only because
that is the time most people think of for such meetings,
but if you look closely you'll find that the story does not say.

The angel has a name, Gabriel,
and Luke must have chosen that name for a reason.

The angel Gabriel appears in scripture twice before he shows up in Luke,
both times in the book of Daniel (8:16; 9:21).

Gabriel comes to tell Daniel the meaning of his visions.
He is described as having the appearance of "a man," that's all,
but something about him must be terrifying
because Daniel throws himself down on the floor.

Pressing his face into the tile, Daniel hears words
spoken by an unseen voice.

"Gabriel," the voice says, "help this man understand the vision."

That is how we know Gabriel's name.

The second time Gabriel comes to Daniel it *is* evening,
and he comes, the story says, "in swift flight."

There is no terror this time.

Maybe once you've seen an angel
whatever you feel goes beyond fear.

Again, Gabriel tells Daniel the meaning of his vision,
but he also tells him something else.

He tells him that he, Daniel, is greatly loved.

Maybe that's why Luke uses the name Gabriel
for the angel who comes to Mary.

She, too is told, that she is greatly favored, greatly loved.

As Barbara Brown Taylor has put it,
whenever there is news of a baby,
there had been a love affair.

God has tried all manner of means to make it plain,
but the tragic and yet wonderful thing

about the love affair between us and God

is that we never seem to know how deep and real the love is on God's part.

David wants to build God a house,
but God wants to build David an entire nation.
Mary learns she will mother a child,
but that child reveals God as father and mother to
generation after generation after generation.
God is crazy in love with us
despite every faithless act of ours
and desires to be with us, even to be one of us.
Such love is so large, so impossible
it cannot fit into any of the usual categories.
So, a lowly girl gets word from a heavenly being
that she is loved and favored and that
she will have a child, *the* child;
the child who will open wide the doors of David's house,
the child who will be God with us
whose kingdom will have no end.
This is a love story about the God who is with us.

God had choices about where to announce this love,
at least three choices.ⁱⁱ
God could have started with the king, with Herod.
Gabriel could have made swift flight into the throne room in Jerusalem
and entrusted the treasure of the news that God is with us
to the politicians.
“That would be the practical option.
Then they could enact legislation to
bring about God's kingdom on earth.
Perhaps the Oval office, [or the Central Committee]
is the best place for God to come.
But part of the news about God's love is that
God is surprisingly at work to humble the proud
while lifting up the downtrodden.”ⁱⁱⁱ
It's true that politicians no longer seem to be very good
at remaining in touch with the most vulnerable people under their care.
David began as a humble shepherd boy.
He was lifted by God above all others.

Yet once the humble David became king
he did not possess God, was not allowed
to house God's great love in a building.
Perhaps kings, prime ministers, Congressmen and presidents
are much too interested in trying to use God's presence with us
for their own ends,
so God did not entrust the news to rulers.

God could have given the news of his abiding love
to the whole people by giving it to the religious leaders.
Aren't the priests God's agents,
couldn't they be trusted to share the news?

There is a hint God might have tried it.

Just a few verses before where we started reading today,
Gabriel came to the priest Zechariah
the father of John the Baptist,
to tell him the good news of John's birth.

Zechariah could not get past the impossibility
of the presence of God
that Gabriel brought with him into the room.

So Gabriel took Zechariah's speech away for awhile,
perhaps to give him time and space to understand
that the news Gabriel was bringing
about God's coming presence was true.

Religious leaders, it seems, are either too accustomed
to holy things, or too unaccustomed to them being true
to be able to share God's abiding love with people in a compelling way,
so God tried again.

This time God chose a teen-aged girl, an unmarried girl,
an invisible girl, the kind of girl who is beneath the notice
of state or church unless, as in Iran, she shows an ankle
and so is harassed and arrested by the morality police.^{iv}

God chose such a one and gave the news to her
that she would be the mother of a baby named "God with us."
Braver than Daniel, more humble than David,

more trusting than Zechariah,
she asked a few sensible questions,
then took the news to her cousin Elizabeth
who was also pregnant,
and there, says Tom Long,
in a place the world counts for nothing--
a conversation between two pregnant women
about stretch marks and swollen ankles--
the news of God with us is first proclaimed.

We have been hearing the news now for a good long time,
so long it's hard to hear afresh.
And why not. It's an impossible thing to believe
that God came into the world for us once,
and is still entering it for our sake even now.
The day an angel came to me I didn't recognize him.
He looked just like a man,
but a man outside my usual acquaintance,
since he had coal black skin and long dread locks
and the lilting voice of a Jamaican.
He was cab driver who saw the car accident that forced our car
to the side of the road, the front fender bashed in
where the other driver had hit us
in a collision on an Atlanta street that would have been head on
if Robert hadn't turned the wheel fast enough.
As it was, we are all unhurt,
though four-year-old Tucker was afraid and crying.
Robert held him in his arms
while he talked to the other driver in the police car
that happened to be behind us when we were hit.
So there I was alone in the back seat with Molly
who was four months old and fast asleep through the whole thing.
"Do you need a ride?" asked the man
who I thought was a cab driver,
his accent so beautiful that I almost wanted him to ask again.
"No, I said, we're fine. The car is drivable."

He smiled, “God was with you,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” I said like a woman who has been taught to be polite.

“No,” he said again, slowly, gently in that unearthly voice.

“God was with you,” and a chill ran down my back.

For an instant everything stopped.

This time when I said, “Yes, I know,”

I suddenly did understand what he meant.

Then he and his smile and his voice and his cab were gone.

I know what you're thinking.

you're thinking he was a cab driver.

It is hard to believe that God loves us so much

so *wildly* as to be with us.

It is such an unlikely story, impossible, really.

Surely at least some of the time we need to ask with Mary

“How can this be?”

And the answer comes with an odd sound that might be words

or might be wings:

“Nothing will be impossible with God.” AMEN.

ⁱ Weisberg, D. S., & Sobel, D.M. Young children discriminate improbable from impossible events in fiction. *Cognitive Development* (2011), doi:10.1016/j.cogdev.2011.08.001

ⁱⁱ Candler School of Theology Homiletics Professor Tom Long is the one who proposed these three options. This portion of the sermon relies on work of his that I have notes about, but for which I have lost the citation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Long's original quote read "The Kremlin" but I have replaced that with the Central Committee, since China is now a more influential world power than Russia.

^{iv} There is a YouTube video of such an incident recorded in Iran in October of last year.