

4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT – B (December 24, 2023)

One of my favorite pastimes is doing word puzzles or games, including crossword puzzles—especially those that pose a real challenge. Once I got a book of really hard crosswords, but they really stumped me; they seemed impossible to complete and I couldn't figure them out.

I can't help but wonder if that idea of impossibility crossed Mary's mind when she received this extraordinary, the 'puzzling' message from the angel Gabriel that we just heard in the gospel. Try to imagine what was going on inside her mind and heart:

- first of all, an angel appears to her—startling enough all by itself, and not exactly an everyday occurrence;
- then the first words she hears from this angel; “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” These had to be startling words to hear for a poor, young woman who was a nobody in the eyes of the mighty and the powerful of the world. In fact, Luke tells us that Mary ‘was greatly troubled and pondered what sort of greeting this might be’;
- and then the biggest mystery of all: Mary is told that she will conceive and bear a son. This had to seem impossible to her; as she asked the angel: “how can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” A very good, logical question on Mary's part, to which the angel answered by saying this would happen by the Holy Spirit and thus outside the natural course of events.

Talk about a really heavy message to hear all at once! If we had been in Mary's place, how would we have responded to the angel?

- ‘no way; that's impossible!’
- ‘am I dreaming? Am I crazy, thinking that I'm actually connecting with an angel?’
- ‘are you sure you have the right person??’

Fortunately for us, Mary didn't go in any of those directions. She heard and trusted in the angel's words: “...nothing shall be impossible for God.’; she didn't say ‘no’ to God at all. Instead, she said ‘yes’: ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.’ That's one of the many reasons we love and honor Mary so much—she fully trusted in God and in his word. She had the grace and faith to submit herself fully to the will of God for Whom the word ‘impossible’ has no meaning.

When you think about it, much of our faith and our life itself seems impossible:

- think of the world, the universe, our very existence as a human person, and then remember that God created everything out of nothing at all. Some say ‘that's impossible’ and claim that there is no such thing as ‘God’ in the first place. But we know better—from Scripture, from common sense and logic, we know that there is a reason for our existence and that of everything else—and that reason has a name: ‘God’, for Whom nothing is impossible.
- think about how God chose to save us from the consequences of the sin of our first parents. He chose to take on our frail human condition in the person of his Son Jesus in order to reconcile us to himself. Some say ‘that's impossible’ and say instead that Jesus is only human and not at all divine or God incarnate. But we know better—from his teaching, his miracles, and especially from his rising from the dead, we know that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine—true God from true God, for Whom nothing is impossible.
- think about how Jesus maintains his presence among us, especially in the Eucharist in which mere bread and wine become his real, true, and actual Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Some say ‘that's impossible’ and declare that the Eucharist is simply a reminder or symbol of his love

for us, and nothing more. But we know better—Scripture, the Church’s 2000-year teaching and Sacred Tradition assure us of the full reality of the Eucharist as Jesus’ gift of himself, his true Body and Blood, to us as God the Son, for Whom nothing is impossible.

One of my first-year seminary professors back in 1984 gave us some very wise advice: “Don’t box God in.” In other words, don’t limit God’s grace or power by what you think is possible or likely or fitting. God doesn’t limit himself in any way for us, especially when it comes to his great desire for our salvation. If the God who created the universe can confine himself to the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary out of his love for us, can we really doubt in any serious way his ability or desire to sustain us in the challenges and tragedies of this life, or to answer our prayers in the best possible way...even we don’t perceive that possibility? Do you have a motto, an overall direction in life? If not, let me suggest that you couldn’t do better than to adopt for yourself the angel’s words to Mary: “nothing shall be impossible for God.” Mary believed that, and said ‘yes’ to God’s will for her...and it really happened. Let’s follow her example.