

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“How Can This Be?”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B)

December 21, 2014

Luke 1:47–55; Luke 1:26–38

(The sermon this morning has a call and response, which is printed in your bulletin. When you hear me say, “How can this be? With God...,” you are invited to respond, “nothing is impossible.” Listen, and I will cue you when to speak.)

An angel, with a name,

who appears at a specific location, Nazareth,

at a specific time, the sixth month of the Jewish year

to a specific wisp of a woman, Mary?

An angel who speaks, who is heard and understood by this young woman?

A virgin who will conceive the Son of God by an overshadowing of the Holy Spirit?

An angel naming a child?

An older barren woman, miraculously now in the sixth month of a pregnancy?

How is this possible?

Or to quote my favorite tennis philosopher, John McEnroe,

“You cannot be serious!”

It was the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who coined the term

“leap to faith” or “leap of faith” as we refer to it.

For Kierkegaard, faith is fundamentally a matter of passion rather than reasoning.

He advocated that faith is not provable, arguing that it is only possible

when faced with uncertainty. Without risk,” he says, “no faith.”

(Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.204)

Faith is therefore commitment in the face of uncertainty;

and the greater the uncertainty, the greater the faith that is demanded.

The greatest faith of all, he says, is the belief in the impossible

and that is how Kierkegaard saw the Christian faith, *as belief in the impossible.*

Christianity, he says, is a paradox, totally absurd

in its narrative of God becoming human.

To believe therefore in this absurd God requires a monumental act of acquiescence,

a passionate commitment, a leap to faith... such as the one that Mary took

when she proclaims, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Let it be with me according to your word."

Are we poised to take that leap?

Do we have eyes and ears to perceive the impossible happening in our midst?

And do we have the passion, the ability and the commitment

to leap by faith toward the notion that God is at work, breaking into our world,

making possibilities where none existed, and turning things towards God?

I want to share with you some pretty miraculous things

that have caught my attention lately, causing me to take that running leap.

Miracle #1

Another terrible thing happened in Syria recently, which is not surprising these days.

A young activist named Peter Kassig lost his head, literally.

Medieval torture was accorded to Peter Kassig in response to his courageous calling

to serve the devastated people of Syria.

Kassig, who was only 26, first visited the Middle East as an Army Ranger.

He fell in love with the place and its people and returned after his tour of duty ended

to serve as a medical technician there,

treating the victims of the civil war in Syria.

Kassig said, "We each get one life and that's it.

You get one shot at this. You don't get any do-overs.
For me, it was time to put up or shut up.
The way I saw it, I didn't have a choice.
This is what I was put here to do. I guess I'm just a hopeless romantic and an idealist, and I believe in hopeless causes."
His parents, longtime members of the Epworth United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, had this response to their son's tragic beheading.
His father quoted Jesus from the book of John,
"Greater love hath no one than this: to lay down his life for another."
His mother said, "Our hearts are battered, but they will mend.
The world is broken, but it will be healed in the end,
and good times will prevail as the one God of many names will prevail."
His father asked for prayer and said that his family would mourn, cry, **and forgive.**
(Pitts, Leonard. "They Killed Peter Kassig." *The Miami Herald*, 11/19/2014)
Forgive? Forgive the heartless act that cut off the precious life of their son?
Forgive, and not hate, forgive and not resent,
forgive and not seek revenge?
Turn the world around on an axis of forgiveness instead of an axis of evil?
I found the response of these parents to be nothing short of miraculous.
I would be honored, as Epworth Methodist Church, to claim these parents as members.
One of the ancient church fathers, John of Damascus said, "For just as all things whatsoever God made he made by the operation of the Holy Ghost, so also it is by the operation of the Spirit that these things are done which surpass nature and cannot be discerned except by faith alone."
(John of Damascus, *The Festal Menaion*. Translated by Mother Mary and Archmandrite Kallistos Ware. London: Faber, 1969)
How can this be? With God...
nothing is impossible!

Miracle #2

I have been haunted by the city of Detroit

ever since I returned from General Assembly there this past June.

It pops up in my dreams; I notice it whenever it is mentioned on the news;

it rises to the top of my prayer list of hopeless causes.

Everywhere you looked there, vacant homes stared back through dark, broken glass

with disheveled lawns overshadowed by weeds and vines.

In some places, one is more apt to meet dogs or cats on the street than people.

In other places, the only people you see are lying down drunk or drugged,

too out of it, even to beg.

Last year, Forbes magazine named Detroit "America's Most Miserable City,"

a distinction earned by the fact that 39.1 percent of all families

and 50.4 percent of all children in the city live below the poverty line.

The unemployment rate is a startling 17.7 percent—more than double

the national average.

The media has shared with the world the city's \$18 billion debt,

and just this week, it emerged from the largest municipal bankruptcy in history.

Last summer, life-giving water was shut off to as many as 150,000 homes,

including those occupied by children, the elderly and infirm.

And as recently as three weeks ago, a huge power outage

knocked out heating and lights in the city for five hours

due to the failing infrastructure of the power grid there

which hadn't been updated in centuries.

Ray Charles may sing of *Georgia, On My Mind*; but it is Detroit that has rented

space in my mind.

Power may flicker, and yet, the power of the Most High is on the move in Detroit.

Rev. Kevin Johnson, whom I met there, minister of The Calvary Presbyterian Church,

the only full-time black Presbyterian pastor still in Detroit,

said that when he completed seminary, he had a tête-à-tête with God

in his dorm room, praying,
“Lord, the city to which I most desire to relocate to is Charleston, SC;
the city to which I least desire to go is Detroit, MI.”
God apparently had a different plan in mind, Johnson says,
as he is now in his 20th year of ministry in Detroit.
God u-turned Johnson, just as God u-turned Mary, just as John the Baptist
cried out from the wilderness for all of us to be open to gospel u-turns,
to God’s holy in-breaking, to unplanned encounters, and to faith adventures.
When we were sent out to walk the streets of Detroit one day last June,
we met many young entrepreneurs who had found cheap retail space to rent,
and to begin a new thing, a risky venture, amidst the devastation.
Empty vacant lots that dot the downtown area
were blooming with organic vegetables, as community gardens are springing
up in the inner-city, to fill the hungry with good things.
Many of the churches in Detroit, of all denominations, are becoming
community churches, actively involved with their adjacent neighborhoods,
“seeking the peace and prosperity of the city”
one near-by household at a time.
I have hopes that our church can likewise become more of a *community church!*
(Johnson, Kevin. “The gospel from Detroit.” *Presbyterians Today*. June, 2014)
In August, Detroit’s religious leaders and allies united their voices in a letter
to the City Council and to the Water Board which controls access
to the life-giving waters of the city, telling them,
“In the name of humanity, to stop the shut-offs!”
Their letter concluded: “To our God we pray, defend the children, the least, the poor.
Help us to do so this day.
Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
 (“An Open Letter from Detroit Religious Leaders and Allies.” Posted by Mark Hannan,
August 8, 2014)

How can a city so down and out, that even Jesus might cry over it,
be making the turn towards hope?

And if a scattered metropolis like Detroit can make that turn,
might not there also be hope for Peshawar, Pakistan, for Sydney, Australia,
for Ferguson, for Cleveland, for New York, for Durham, and for other cities
where the cry is going out for more democratic policing;
and for and Homs, Syria, where the yearning is for basic human rights;
and for Kenema, Sierra Leone, the epicenter of that country's
Ebola epidemic there?

Is it not possible that the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High
might overshadow any of these and other troubled social systems with
the probability of new life?

Another of the ancient church fathers, Ephrem the Syrian said, "It was fitting that the
Architect of the works of creation should come and raise up the house that had fallen
and that the hovering Spirit should sanctify the buildings that were unclean."
(*St. Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* 1.25. Translated by C. McCarthy.
Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the
Univeristy of Manchester, 1993.)

How can this be? With God...

Nothing is impossible!

Miracle #3

I want to introduce you to a visitor who is a subject of impossibility.

This is Anthony Ross, who visited our church on November 23, and shared
some of his story with me.

It's so amazing that he's written a book about it called *Homeless at Age 13
to a College Graduate*.

It's another miracle story that I wanted him to share "in a nutshell"
with you this morning.

We'll afford him time later to tell it in more detail.

Anthony was born in Washington, DC, one of four children, to a mother who was addicted to cocaine, and to a father whom he never knew. As a child, he didn't realize that he and his sisters were being neglected. Normal to them was no running water, no heat, no air conditioning, minimal food.

But when his mother had a particularly bad day and chased her children from the home with a meat cleaver, threatening to kill them, even minimal normality vanished for these four children.

By age 13, Ross had been separated from his sisters and was bouncing from shelter to shelter, falling through the cracks of DC's overwhelmed DSS system.

He never went to school regularly after that, but he did manage to take and pass the GED by his own initiative.

The turning point in his life came when a well-meaning activist offered to take him to a program for high-risk children at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC.

And he had to decide quickly if he would accept the offer.

"I don't know," Ross said to himself. "I'm not deaf or hard of hearing. Why should I go to this program?"

But something urged him to accept the offer, something outside of himself, and his life turned around as a result.

The program made possible a full-ride to St. Augustine's University in Raleigh, where Ross went on to graduate Magna Cum Laude as president of the student body.

It also has opened many doors for him, as he has met Cindy Lauper, Oprah, numerous dignitaries, as well as President Obama himself.

He is now a first year law student at NCCU law school, and has set his sights for even loftier goals.

How did he go from homelessness at age 13 to law school at age 27?

How did he go from life-threatened to life-affirmed?

How did he go from humiliated, to highly favored?

How can this be? With God...

Nothing is impossible!

Friends, the story of Mary's visitation by an angel is incredible, beyond belief. Our secular version of Mary, Cinderella, sings, too, of impossible things happening every day. It's one of my all-time favorite songs! But it requires that extra Kierkegaardian leap of faith to attribute these impossibilities *to the Lord of transformation*, who pays attention, draws near, takes the initiative to turn towards us in love, and then asks that we respond likewise, in turning our lives God-ward. And just maybe, if we stretch our capacity to imagine and to leap and to turn towards the coming Holy One, we might also be able to see the hand of God at work in the miracles happening right before our eyes:

of Margaret Eme being placed in an apartment this Tuesday,
thanks to your help;
of Parker and BJ Morton's son, Peter,
living normally once again after a liver transplant;
of Ed Kwon, surrounded by prayers and love, outliving his prognosis;
of instances of unconditional forgiveness;
of the glory of God, magnified by every soul;
and of God, coming to us as Savior, Jesus the Christ:
with us, like us, and for us and for the world so loved.

How can this be? With God...

Nothing is impossible. Amen.