**Love: When You Least Expect It**

**Text: Luke 1:46-55**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 23, 2018**

As I listened to Ramona tell the story of The Little Drummer Boy, I was transported back to a Christmas past when I was in the Junior Choir in my home church in Chicago, and we sang *The Little Drummer Boy*. Our sweet little voices sang, “Come, they told me, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum,” while the men of the Senior Choir sang “Rum-pum-pum-pum-pum.” Those men were our dads and surrogate granddads, and all of us kids were like one big family being raised collectively by these men and their wives, so it was all very warm and wonderful, and nearly 60 years later it still brings a tear to my eye.

 Perhaps the most amazing thing about that Junior Choir is that we memorized every word of every piece. Years later, as an adult, I was talking with our former choir director and she said, “I can’t believe I got you kids to do that.” And I told her, “We didn’t think we had a choice. You told us to do it, and we figured that failure wasn’t an option.” Looking back on it now, I think we were too dumb to know that we couldn’t pull it off, so – guess what? – we pulled it off!

It’s amazing what can happen when you don’t know that you’ve just embarked on mission impossible. That’s the key take away from this morning’s scripture.

Mission impossible: that’s what Mary had just been assigned. The angel Gabriel had appeared to this young virgin – perhaps still a teenager – and he said, “Listen, Mary, don’t look now, but you’re going to have a baby.” And Mary said, “Wait, what?!” Or, as our own Mary said in our Christmas pageant two weeks ago: “I’ve got just 1 question for you, Mr. Angel: “How?!” And it’s not clear which part of Gabriel’s message she’s asking about, because there are multiple impossible missions here. It’s not just that a virgin is going to give birth, but also that the baby will pull together the bickering Jewish factions, bring an end to the Roman occupation, establish God’s Kingdom of love and justice, and save the world from sin in the process. *Any* of these might be mission impossible! How, indeed, are you going to do this, Mr. Angel? Gabriel himself recognizes that what he’s asking Mary to do is all but impossible; because he says, perhaps to reassure himself as much as her, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Well, there you have it, Mary: failure is not an option. But, she’s not convinced right away. She says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” And I hear in her words not a sign of faith, but a sigh of resignation. Other translations call her the *handmaid* of the Lord, which could mean the *slave* of the Lord, so she doesn’t have a choice. She *has* to do the Lord’s bidding. Mary steps out in a kind of resigned faith, vowing to act *as if* all of this will somehow come to pass, even if she doesn’t have a clue how.

But then, something happens. The sigh of resignation is replaced by a robust affirmation. Something happens to transform the slump-shouldered slave into a strong woman of faith. What happens is that Mary visits Elizabeth; two cousins who form a tight community. What happens is the *power* of community. What happens is the power of the Holy Spirit working *through* community. And now, in the power of the Spirit, Mary boldly proclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord!” Mary’s soul is like a magnifying glass, transforming the beam of God’s light into a powerful ray that burns away injustice, lifts the lowly, and topples the proud from their high horses. Through Mary’s faith and the power of community, the Kingdom of God draws near.

Of course, none of what Mary sang about in the Magnificat had happened yet. Much of it *still* hasn’t happened today. So great is her faith that she will act *as if* it has happened, as if it *can* happen, as if nothing will stop her from accomplishing this thing that the Lord has placed upon her.

And, of course, the Lord has placed a great deal upon her. I mean, what God is expecting of Mary is *crazy*! What Mrs. Ramey expected of us in the Junior Choir was crazy. But when you’re too dumb or too naïve to realize just how crazy something is, you step into this magical, mystical space where the Spirit intervenes…and things happen!

We live our whole lives in that magical, mystical space. It takes a Carol Ramey or a Christa Tahere or an Angel Gabriel for us to realize it sometimes, but the universe is a mystical place where the Holy Spirit is spreading something like fairy dust, and the seemingly impossible happens. I want to tell you some stories about that this morning.

My step-daughter, Allison, and her husband, Jerad, are both pastors. 2 months ago, they were both unemployed. His ministry in Mansfield, Ohio had ended, and none of the calls that she’d been pursuing had panned out. Then she got a nibble from Vine St. Christian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. In no time she had a plan. In less than 6 weeks they were going to sell their house in Ohio, buy a condo in Nashville, and she would assume her new duties as Associate Pastor at Vine St. But the church hadn’t called her yet! My sister-in-law was visiting us at the time (this was mid-October), and Helen and Martha just laughed and said, “They don’t have a clue. They have *no idea* how long these things take!” The realtor in Mansfield was laughing as well. She said, “This house is going to be on the market for a year.” But Jerad and Allison got their network of friends and colleagues going, and within a *week* they had 2 offers. Then they spent just one weekend in Nashville, and they made an offer on a condo. At this point, Allison didn’t even have a call yet! But on November 15, Allison began her new job at Vine St; by December 1 they had moved into their condo, and this weekend they closed on the house in Ohio. Okay, so it took 8 weeks; but they did it. They acted as if it would all come to pass, and it did. When the power of the Holy Spirit moves through a community of friends, the impossible happens, and the Kingdom of God draws near.

We live in a magical, mystical universe. 50 years ago this weekend, 3 brave astronauts set off on a mission to explore a tiny corner of that universe. If you’re at least 60 years old, you probably remember being glued to the television on the morning of December 21, 1968 as the giant Saturn V rocket blasted-off from Cape Kennedy and Apollo 8 was hurled toward the moon. Looking back on it now, you have to wonder, “What were we thinking!?” The Apollo spacecraft had flown only once with people aboard, the Saturn V had been tested only twice (and one of those was a failure), few humans had been in even a high earth orbit, let alone going to the moon, and if something went wrong, there was no Plan B. Nevertheless, a hasty decision was made to send the second Apollo mission to take 10 laps around the moon. It could’ve easily been yet another 1968 disaster. But who can forget the Christmas Eve broadcast as they orbited the moon and read the Creation story from the Bible? And who can forget that moment when they had to fire the Apollo’s engine on the dark side of the moon in order to return home? It was very early Christmas morning. They had to make that burn without radio contact with the earth. If we didn’t hear their voices within a small window of only a few minutes, we’d know that the burn had failed and they’d be lost in space forever. It was a few minutes passed midnight in Chicago. I remember listening to the radio in our living room with my parents and siblings. The voice of Mission Control called out, “Apollo 8, Houston.” No answer. “Apollo 8, Houston.” Silence. “Apollo 8, Houston…” That window of opportunity was all but closed. And then we heard the strong voice of Jim Lovell: “Houston, Apollo 8 here; be advised that there is a Santa Claus!” The engine had fired, and Apollo 8 was headed home. It was the power of community that made it possible: the small community on Apollo 8, the vast community of ground support all over the world, and the community of prayer surrounding them that Christmas Eve. The power of the Spirit moves through such communities, and the impossible happens, and the Kingdom of God draws near.

We live in a magical, mystical universe. And rarely has that been more evident than on Christmas Eve, 1914. The young men of Europe had marched off to war 6 months earlier, confident that they’d be home by Christmas. Yet here they were amidst the mud and the blood of trench warfare. All along the British lines the men longed for home. Then, suddenly, they heard something. It sounded like singing. Coming from the German lines:

Stille nacht, heilege nacht

Alles schlaft, einsam wacht.

“Blimy,” said a British soldier. “The Huns are serenading us!”

Nur das traute hoch heilige Paar
Holder Knab' im lockigen Haar

So the Brits joined them:

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace.

Back and forth they sang to each other; perhaps *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* from the British lines and *Es ist ein Rose entsprungen* – *Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming* – from the Germans. Suddenly, a small group was spotted, headed toward the British trenches, a white flag marking their journey like a Christmas star in the dark night. While still some distance away, a few Brits put down their guns, went over the top, and greeted them. Then some more Germans approached. Soon German and British troops were pouring out of the trenches and meeting in No Man’s Land.

“Happy Christmas, old chap,” shouted the Brits. Froliche Weinachten, meinen Freund,” the Germans replied. Cigarettes and other small gifts were exchanged. A ball appeared and a soccer match ensued. In some places the unofficial truce held for an entire week, from Christmas to New Years. And maybe it would not have happened if only one soldier had had the crazy idea of reaching out to the enemy. It took a group of soldiers, acting in community, from both sides of No Man’s Land, to make it happen. That’s the power of the Holy Spirit, moving through community, making the impossible happen. That’s the Kingdom of God nearing near.

 We live in a magical, mystical universe, enchanted by the Holy Spirit, where the Kingdom of God draws near in ways that surprise us and delight us. The seemingly impossible is happening all around us, all the time. Some may call it fate, some may call it providence, some may call it a guardian angel. I don’t care what you call it, as long as you trust it. As long as you lean into it. As long as it becomes a principle of your life that you count on and rejoice in and marvel at.

Prayer helps; mainly because prayer opens us up to all of the marvelous things that the Spirit is already doing all around us. Those things are happening all the time. Prayer helps us to be aware of them, and to tap into them.

I mean, we’ve taken on this crazy dream called Our Future Story, and already the Spirit is surprising us with the initial in-breaking of its fruition. Already we’re being approached by community partners who want to run programs out of our building. Already, out of the blue, we’ve been approached by someone who may have the gifts to be the Camp Manager that our story envisions. It’s still very early but at least she got us thinking; and she didn’t even know that we had something called a Future Story. And then there’s the miracle of the Men’s Warming Center, coming together in really just a 6 week period, and our homeless neighbors are being offered hospitality and hope in the name of the One for whom there was likewise no room, but He came anyway, and He’s been working miracles in our midst ever since.

It’s amazing what happens when failure is not an option. It’s amazing what happens when folks are too naïve to know that something is impossible, so they step out in faith, and the seemingly impossible becomes incarnate in our midst. Just ask Mary. When you live in a magical, mystical universe, there’s no telling what will come to pass. Especially in the thin place that is Advent, and Christmas, when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Amen.