

Sermon – December 19, 2021
“You are to call him Jesus”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 1:26-38

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we love others in your mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! Does anyone know what time it is? On my watch, it is Sunday December 19th at XX:XX. Welcome to the last Sunday of Advent. Christmas is only a few days away. There are only a few more shopping days for those procrastinators among us. I have two reminders for us this morning. Please pick up a copy of *Sola Sancta Caritas, One Holy Love*. This is Kay's and my gift to you and there should be enough for one for each family. This little book is about John Wesley's focus on the Love of God. The second reminder is for those who picked up a card from the altar last January and should have now given their card and the financial gift of love it contains to a person whom they have met in this last year who has needs. If you have not yet found a person, don't be concerned. There is still time to help those God brings into our lives who are struggling and need love and assistance. Does anyone have a moment of provoking to love to share this morning? <> Several of us from the Afton UMW drove around the counties of Northumberland and Lancaster on Monday delivering gifts for

Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree program. They are gifts for children from their incarcerated parent. We were blessed to be those who delivered these gifts and were blessed by the love that these gifts bring to these families. And let me share that one of the grandmothers we met gave us a fresh sweet potato pie, which I will say was a very love-provoking gift and was delicious. Anyone else have something to share? It is my prayer that we will all work to continue to provoke each other to love as long as it is today, and every day it is today. I am not sure that we are yet known in this community as "love-provoking Methodists," but I think we have gotten started, and I hope that we will continue to seek to provoke each other in love and those in our community to love.

Last week we looked at Matthew's account of Joseph's repentance and his obedient turning from his righteous plan to quietly divorce Mary to following God's plan and will, taking Mary as his wife and naming her son Jesus. This week we turn to Luke's Gospel to catch a glimpse of the other side of the story, Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. Mary is a young woman, at least age 12, who is living in the back-country town of Nazareth. Her future, as she has known for some part of a year, has been to be married to Joseph and to follow God's direction to families to be fruitful and multiply. Mary's days are spent preparing for that coming day when she and Joseph will move from the engagement time of their marriage to being a couple united before the Lord. Luke does not give us any list of special qualifications that Mary possesses that would qualify her for work in God's plan for salvation. No skills that Mary possesses that might uniquely qualify her for such a role are listed. Mary is a young woman planning to be married to Joseph. We are not made aware of her family, and Luke doesn't tell us that she may be in the line of Levi until she is given information about her relative Elizabeth. Mary is the humble wife of Joseph, a young woman with no qualifications and no family influence, but she is a young woman who is available and has a willing heart.

God steps into Mary's life by sending the angel Gabriel to greet her and to ask her if she will give birth to the Son of God. Her encounter with an angel is as most others are. She is initially filled with fear and must be reassured and released from her fear by the angel's words, "do not fear" before she can communicate with God's messenger. The angel calls Mary, "favored one" and tells her the "Lord is with her." These are words that are found in key moments throughout the Old Testament accounts of God's interaction with His people when God is working to bring about His plan of salvation through people. We can easily recall Moses as

one favored by God whom God worked through to bring Israel out of cruel bondage in Egypt. Or we might recall David as one favored by God. David led Israel into a life of worship and praise of God, freeing Israel from conflict with her earthly enemies and leading Israel as a man with a heart after God's heart. Gabriel's introduction to Mary should bring to our minds these and other people in the history of God's people who were favored and were also key people God worked through to bring about salvation. Those words describing Mary alert us to another moment in time when God is seeking to move His salvation plan forward. Freed from her fear by the angel's words, Mary is able to listen to the angel's message. Notice what Gabriel tells Mary, she will conceive in her womb and bear a son and name him Jesus. The angel goes on to explain to Mary who this son will be, "He will be great, will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." We should not miss the difference between Mary and her son. Mary is the favored one by God, and we should call her blessed, but Jesus' role and resume far exceed Mary's. Jesus is the focus of God's message to Mary, who is asked to be part of God's plan for salvation by bearing a holy child, the Son of God.

Now I cannot imagine what Mary is thinking at this moment. The implications of this request from God are staggering and difficult for me to grasp, yet Mary's reply to God is basically, "How will this occur?" She does not ask a long list of questions about what it will mean for her or her upcoming marriage, or what might become of her life or what cost might there be in her life to bear a holy child, or any other of the questions that come to my mind as I try to ponder what Mary has been asked to do by God. In response to Mary's request for how God's plan will come about, she is told by the angel, "the Holy Spirit, the creative Spirit of God, will come upon her, and the power of the God Most high will overshadow her and as a result she will give birth to a holy child who will be called the Son of God." And after the angel gives her an unsolicited, verifying sign for God's plan, telling Mary that her relative Elizabeth is six months pregnant, the angel tells Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." This last statement should send us off again on another journey through the Old Testament seeking to identify other times when God used this expression. We might recall Sarah and her laughter when Abraham is told by angelic visitors that Sarah will bear a child in her old age. At the time, Sarah laughs at this impossible idea, yet God assures Sarah that for God nothing is impossible. And in due time Isaac, whose name means laughter, is born. We might also recall Moses and his

encounters with Pharaoh when Moses is also told that nothing is impossible for God and God's people are brought out of Egypt and cruel bondage there by God's mighty hand to worship God in the wilderness. And we might recall Jerimiah, who in the days of the siege of Israel in a break in the siege, was sent out to buy a piece of land as a symbol that once again in spite of the coming exile, land in the future would again be bought and sold in Israel, for nothing is impossible for God.

Mary's reply to the angel's instruction is one of those relies that rings out from the word of God across the ages for its simplicity and powerful trust of God. Mary simply replies, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Let me say that again in case we missed it, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The angel departs and in that instant all that the angel had told Mary begins to come about. The kingdom of God begins to break into the now of this present evil age. The present evil age is dealt its first death blow here in this little empty nowhere town of Nazareth when Mary replies to God, "Here I am," agreeing to be the mother of God in the flesh. At that moment in history, everything begins to change. The impossible has begun, salvation for God's people is coming. Something new breaks into the fallen creation and God's plan for the redemption of His people finds a new path forward in the womb of Mary. For God all things are possible. Let us stop here this morning and for a moment ponder what God did through the Holy Spirit in that instant. Redemption of God's people begins through a humble virgin. In a small town unnoticed by anyone, the Kingdom of God begins to grow. Nothing is impossible for God.

As we ponder Mary's humble response to God's plan, let us ask, "What impossible thing is there in our life that we need God to do?" Let this Christmas be the moment in our lives when we receive the gift of Jesus, God with us, from God. Let this Christmas, this Advent season, not end with an exchange of gifts on Christmas morning, a feast in our homes, and then us moving on as we have always been and miss God making the impossible possible occur in our lives. Instead, let us end this Advent season with our own impossible situation surrendered to God, for whom all things are possible. This is not a story that ends on Christmas morning. It is not a story that ends with unwrapped gifts and piles of wrapping paper strewn about our living rooms. This story does not end; it is an eternal story. The wise men have seen the star that heralds a king's birth, and they will soon leave their homes to follow the star of a king, and we are invited to journey with them as they bring gifts to a king whose birth was heralded by the heavens. We are

going to move through Epiphany into Lent, and we will later stand at the foot of a cross that bears the dead body of a crucified savior. We will once again come to the tomb and wonder if God can do the impossible. We will see the empty tomb, a risen Lord, an ascended Lord sitting at the right hand of God. We will witness again the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and enter once more into the ongoing days of living in the presence of God in the flesh, God with us, in the in-breaking kingdom of God. So, as we approach Christmas, as we move forward in time in a new Christian year, a new beginning, let us ask ourselves, "What impossible thing is there in our broken lives that only Jesus Christ can repair?" Will we, at the end of Advent, trust God to do the impossible in our lives, to heal our pain, dry our tears, and be present with us? Can we open our hearts to God and surrender to Jesus all of our brokenness, pain, and scars, letting God accomplish the impossible in our lives and heal us?

Mary, standing before the angel, comes in an instant to an unexpected decision point, a crossroad in her life: Will she remain Joseph's wife or will she surrender to God's will and plan, thereby risking all she knows to say yes to God? At the time of decision, her reply to God is, "Here I am." And in that instant, the kingdom of God begins to break into the world and the present evil age begins to end. From that moment, a child is born for us, unto us a son is given whose name shall be called wonderful counselor, the everlasting God, and the Prince of peace. Christmas is the time when we also come again to this same question in our own lives, where the crossroads of our lives is a decision of "Will we surrender all and trust God?" Don't just go through the motions of another Christmas celebration. Don't come to the end of another Advent and move on down the same paths as we have always taken, the ones that we think are the secure paths. Stop at the crossroad this year and surrender to God the impossible need in our lives and let this Advent be a new beginning, a pivotal moment in our lives, one where we surrender our lives completely to God and trust that God is waiting to do the impossible in and through us. Mary's reply to the angel of God was, "Here I am." What is our answer to God's question to each of us? Will we continue to limit God and hold on to our brokenness, our pain, our hopelessness, or will we trust God to accomplish in us and through us the impossible of healing, filling us with unmerited love, and receiving the gift of new life for ourselves, and then being used by God to bring this gift to others? What will be our answer to God's call in our lives this Christmas? Mary's reply was, "Here I am." Mary's answer to God gives way to our joy on Christmas morning as we celebrate that Christ is born. What is our answer to God's call in our

lives to become a pathway for the impossible? What will our answer be to the coming of the Christ child, the King of kings, the Lord of lords? Dare to open our hearts to the God of the impossible and say with Mary, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Pray with me: Father God, we need you to bring about the impossible in our broken lives and fill us with the gift of love so that we may respond with Mary and be first healed and then used by you to bring salvation to all of the people in all of the places you will guide us to go. We have come to the end of Advent, Lord. Give us the courage to trust you completely and surrender our lives to you fully, and then, like Mary, reply to your call in our lives with, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Lord, open our hearts and guide our feet to turn and follow you with all of our heart, soul, and might. Amen