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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, December 21, 2014

“How Can This Be?”

Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

This weekend I’m singing in the chorus for a production of Handel’s *Messiah* at my parents’ church, with a full orchestra and paid soloists and their church choir joined by pastors and friends from all over New Castle County. Thursday was our first rehearsal with the orchestra and soloists and everyone, and we made it through the tenor solos, and the bass, and the alto, and the first few choruses, and then the soprano soloist gets up, and we’re really getting into it by this point, and she reaches the peak: “Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a *shepherd* which is Christ the Lord!”

And we had to stop her. Okay, let’s try that again. *Right*, she said, *Savior*, not shepherd. Got it. We in the chorus joked a little: “Well, I guess that’s true, but it has a little bit less punch.”

The Annunciation story would have looked a little different: I’m going to give birth to a *shepherd*? Well, I would have thought he’d be a carpenter like Joseph, but okay. Sure.

It would have been difficult in that case for Mary to sing about God’s astounding justice in this hymn of praise we have come to know as the Magnificat, after the Latin translation of the first line. A shepherd just doesn’t have quite the same world-changing possibility.

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Usually these are taken as separate passages – the Annunciation one week and then maybe the Magnificat in another week, or another year – but reading them together really highlights the amazing charge that Mary is taking on. And she *did* know it, despite the popular song asking otherwise. Mary’s song is not just about God’s favor for her, in choosing her for this life-changing role; it starts there but then immediately becomes huge in scope, for generation to generation to the descendants of Abraham forever.

This is not just about one baby. This is about a new life that will flip the world upside down, that will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. This one baby will change everything. What amazing hope!

And yet somehow, Mary sings in the past tense, while she is still pregnant, as if God has *already* filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. How can this be? And scholars have puzzled over that one with no good answers, leaving us to revel in the oddness of this past-tense future kingdom. Trisha Lyons Senterfitt describes a stained-glass window in the Monastery of the Holy Spirit – it depicts a pregnant Mary, *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, “with outstretched arms and a womb so large it contains Jesus standing as a grown man, with his arms open wide and enough room left over for God’s rebirthing of all creation.”

It is as if, as soon as she becomes pregnant, she carries within her the seed of the whole Kingdom of God, about to burst forth on the world in a shower of red and yellow stained-glass pieces, bursting with new light into our darkened world. On a level beyond understanding, in this little fetus which is probably no bigger than a lentil by the time she arrives to visit Elizabeth, in that baby which is not even yet a baby, the realm of God is already grown to fullness. For us it is both past and present and still very much future, and yet somehow the possibility is already fully realized. The Light of the World is coming, is here and yet not here, is shining with the light of all God's glory, even if it seems like only a spark.

It is a powerful image for this winter solstice day, the shortest day of the year. Today the dark and cold are at their peak, and the only direction to go is closer to the light. Our light is coming into the world, even if all we can see from here is dark. We light candles, one more small flame against the darkness, in faith that we will, tomorrow, move one step closer to the sun.

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I had hoped that today I could stick to preaching something warm and positive, to stay on hope and peace and "It's almost Christmas!" But then yesterday, two police officers in Brooklyn were murdered while on duty.

And even though it's not clear yet what motivated the shooting exactly, almost immediately commentators began to draw connections with the recent protests against police brutality, as if to make this a question of police versus civilians, as if calling for an end to the violence against African Americans somehow might encourage *more* violence against police.

And I mourn for a world where lives are lost because of fear. Where people become more and more divided from one another, where any killing can be tolerable because we have lost the ability to see the humanity of anyone different from ourselves. How can this be??

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Still. Into a world torn apart by violence, hatred, and corruption, the angel Gabriel appears to a girl who had no reason to hope for anything to change anytime soon, and says "Fear not." God is doing something, he says, and you have a part to play. The world is going to change. Something big is happening, and God needs you to nurture this something into being. You can change the world.

"What??" she says, me? How could I? How can this be? This is the way the world works. The rich stay rich, and the hungry stay hungry, and my plan for my life does not include giving birth to the savior of the universe.

But nothing is impossible with God. And more than that, our God is one who turns our expectations on their heads, over and over again. Our God does not just surprise us once every ten years or so with something truly miraculous. Every year we celebrate the son of God bursting in on this world, because our God is always at work around us and within us, even when we think everything is just business as usual.

Each year the days grow darker and the nights grow longer, and we have faith that eventually the world will turn and the days will get warmer, because that's what happens every year and that's just how things work. And when we are at our darkest, somehow, sometimes, we can see God's messenger coming to us with the strangest ideas. The suggestion, somehow, that *we* can help bring God's light to the world in a way that defies logic.

It makes us scratch our heads in puzzlement, because that's not what we're expecting. The world is just supposed to plod along and continue being normal, and maybe that normal is violence and fear but at least it's predictable. Me, God? Why should I step out of the routine and take a risk with something different?

Sometimes, though, different is what it takes to get to the realm of God. If the usual is a world where people are starving and communities are torn apart by violence and the "lucky" ones hide in fear of everyone else, isn't it time for something different? "But how can that be?" we ask. This is just the way the world is.

In this season of miracles, can you hear the voice of God's messenger calling to you? On this day, the longest night of the year, can you see the spark of the light of the world coming in the dark? As a baby is being born, long ago and far away, what is being born in you for this world today?

For nothing will be impossible with God.