

Good Sunday morning from a cold, snow covered hill in Rockport.....

The Advent theme for today is love! We can sure use a lotta that, yes?!? I've sensed a lot of love among you as I have received your offerings of "six words describing gratitude" over these past few weeks. I'll be including them as a "Christmas list" to all of you as part of "a simple worship service for Christmas Eve" which I'll be sending out on Christmas Eve. **I announced that we would try to gather at 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve in our church parking lot to sing/hum Christmas carols** -- that's for those who can walk to the church from home, or drive if need be, dressing warmly..... BUT, the weather forecast for Thursday afternoon and evening now predicts rain for that time period..... Hm..... **If it's raining, or sleeting/freezing rain, we will not gather**..... I don't think we can safely gather inside the church at this time. I'll send out an e-mail on Thursday afternoon to let you know, one way or the other, if we can come together, dressed warmly, masked – of course, on Christmas Eve at 4 p.m.!

I know I've said this before, but I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, but please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... You all are a gift of the finest kind to me as we march forward into 2021, hoping for better times, calmer heads, more loving actions in our community, our country and our world....

Blessings to all on this fourth Sunday of Advent in the Christian tradition..... Susan

p.s. I will download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

A simple online worship service for Sunday, December 20, 2020
The fourth Sunday of Advent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

A Call to Worship

From ancient days, God has been present.
From ancient days, we pray and we listen.
From ancient days, the promise has sounded.
From ancient days, we journey in hope.
From ancient days, love finds new birth.
From ancient days, we worship in wonder....

even as we meet in cyberspace and not in the flesh
this fourth Sunday of Advent.
Amen.

“A Prayer of the People for the fourth Sunday of Advent”*

God of joy and grace, in this busy season,
we do our best to take time to quiet our spirits in your presence.

We pause and remember....

Christmas celebrations past and present
and remind ourselves that the birth of the Christ child
is the heart of this season,
no matter a virus in our midst and chaos all around us.

We pause and remember....

encounters in your creation
that have filled us with awe and gratitude.

We pause and remember....

friends, family, and strangers
who have shown your love to us.

We pause and remember....

all those who grieve, struggle, or who are in pain.

May they feel your healing presence.

God of joy and mercy, hope and longing,

we pause....

and ask that we might discover and unwrap
your gift of unconditional love in some way this season
so that we might see you anew in one another.

Amen.

*Adapted from a prayer in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, December 23, 2012

A Reading of Scripture – Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and 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." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High

will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A sermon based on Luke 1:26-38
“Nothing will be impossible with God”

Will you pray with me. Amazing God, you make promises to us that we find hard to believe. Yet, we keep coming back to hear you make them again and again, longing to hear the words, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” Keep us open to your miracles this day, in the midst of so much hard news, so much pain in the world. Amen.

The angel Gabriel says to young Mary, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” In our time of pastoral prayer each week in our service, now via cyberspace rather than physical space since March 15th, we learn of many stories of suffering and pain. We hear about so many longing for new and renewed life in deep wells of pain and death.

But in the midst of all of that, we also hear prayers of thanksgiving for new and renewed life – prayers for families coming together via Zoom and Facetime over the holidays. Thanksgiving for neighbors we can call upon in hard times, even if we can’t gather in person right now. Thanksgiving for new opportunities to serve those in our community in the greatest need.

Life is indeed a topsy turvy thing, isn’t it? One moment we’re in tears over some sad event in someone’s life, death coming to one brought down by the covid virus. And the next moment we’re smiling because renewed life has come to one who was lost and is now found, one who has recovered from the covid virus. Or we’re laughing, thinking of a preacher’s slip of the tongue, announcing “Bob, the Baptist” instead of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness. Or my announcing, when we can gather again in the flesh rather than on line, “happy hour” after church rather than “coffee hour.”

Especially in the holiday season, the push and pull of the joys and sorrows of life seem so close to the surface – so open in goodness and so raw in pain. How come we can’t just have the good prayers of thanksgiving? How come we always

have prayers asking for healing, helping, and hoping in the midst of life's tragedies? How come bad things happen to good people? How come?

.... People ask these questions of me all the time. How come this bad thing had to happen, Susan? Can't you do something with that "direct line" you have to God? I'm speechless when people ask me these hard questions. I want to look behind me, and say, "God, can't you do something about these hard questions?" All of my seven years of seminary education and twenty years in ministry haven't give me any good answers for why a young mother gets advanced breast cancer, or why a three year old member of a church family dies from cancer, or why a a beloved sister or brother or friend diea too soon. Or why dementia robs a person, not of their body, but of their personhood. I don't know why.

And yet, I take heart today. I take heart because of Mary. Young Mary, so venerated in the Roman Catholic Church. An Irish Catholic friend of mine once said to me, "If Jesus won't let you in the front door, Mary will let you in the back door!" But for us Protestant types, we usually only talk about Mary on this Sunday before Christmas Eve. We hear about how she responds to the angel Gabriel.

I don't know why but every time I hear this passage, I think of the movie "Gone with the Wind." I think of Butterfly McQueen who plays the slave servant girl on the plantation saying in total fear to Scarlett, "I don't know nuthin' 'bout birthin' no babies, Miz Scarlett!" I have this image of Mary saying to the angel, "I don't know nuthin' 'bout birthin' no babies, Mistah Gabriel!" And yet, Mary does birth a baby, a baby who comes to change the world and upset a whole lot of apple carts. Mary proves, as only an innocent young girl can, that "nothing is impossible with God." (Lk 1:37)

Mary knows nothing about what is going to happen to her. She must be scared to death about this prediction from a strange creature identifying himself as an angel that she's going to give birth before Joseph has ever known her "in the Biblical sense," meaning the very real physical sense.

She's going to give birth to the reason for the Christian faith. She's going to give birth to the divine son of God who will become the model of divinity and humanity for all the world's Christians. She's going to become a momma with no pre-natal care, no Dr. Spock or any other baby expert to tell her what to do, not even a competent ob-gyn to guide her through the intricacies of pregnancy and the birth process. She must have been one scared young girl, don't you think?

And yet could she have been any more scared than any one of us who has just received the diagnosis of cancer for ourselves or a loved one, the reality of Alzheimer's in a partner's world, the intrusion of the covid virus into our communities and our homes, the news of a bad accident involving someone we love, the tragedy of a natural disaster, or the visit from a soldier in full military dress telling us a son or daughter or husband or wife or father or mother has been killed in combat? Could Mary have been any more scared than any of those? I think not.

Mary can be a good model for how we are to answer those nagging and never ending questions, "Why did this have to happen? What am I going to do?" I believe Mary gives us four steps to follow:

First, she "ponders in her heart" (Lk 1:29) what the angel has told her. She thinks about it. She mulls it over in her mind. She wonders, but withholds judgment while she's wondering. She allows herself to just "be" with the news she has been given.

Then she continues to listen to what Gabe has to say, reassuring her that God will be with her through it all.

Then she questions Gabe, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Lk 1:34) Questions are not bad. Questions are helpful. They don't always have clear cut answers, although Gabe certainly gives Mary a clear cut answer: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God." (Lk 1:35) Then he tells her that her aged relative Elizabeth will also bear a son, even though she's way past childbearing age, and then he gives her the ultimate answer, that's Ultimate with a capital U, assurance, "For nothing will be impossible with God." (Lk 1:37)

Then Mary consents to all she has been told. She says to Gabe, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Lk 1:38)

Four steps Mary offers us when we are confronted with tragic news, difficult circumstances, unexpected pain, or an unknown future:

First, thinking about what has happened, pondering it, rolling it around in our heads so we can get used to it.

Then, listening for more information to help make it somehow believable and understandable.

Then, asking questions and listening to the answers we're given, even if we don't like them.

Then consenting, accepting what is to come with the knowledge that God will not leave us alone with our fears of the unknown to come.

All of these steps are easier to carry out if someone is right there with us, holding our hand, encouraging us, standing by. Although we aren't told Mary had anyone doing that for her. Maybe her betrothed, Joseph, did. Maybe her relative Elizabeth. Perhaps we can be that someone for another who is faced with a difficult and scary future.

A simple set of steps, hard to carry out. But Mary does carry them out. And so can we, because we are called upon by angels of God every day to step out into unknown territory – when the cancer diagnosis comes true, the death occurs, the accident happens, the job is lost, the money runs out. The truth is though, it seems to me, we don't often recognize the angels who visit us. Or we think they were sent for someone else, close the door in their faces and continue on ringing our hands in despair.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her wonderful sermon on this text writes of Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian, who said, “What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.”^[1]

Let the goodness of Jesus be born in us this day because nothing will be impossible with God. Let the people say, “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our President that he might do the right things in coming weeks for the betterment and future of all of us.....

Please hold in your prayers, the family and friends of April DeVarney, a member of our congregation, who died from cancer recently....

And for a friend of mine, Judith, whose husband, Eric, finally left this earth for the wild abandon of God late last night, and for the family and friends of Janet, another friend of mine and devoted Methodist in Sarasota, Florida who also took flight last night into that same wild abandon of God....

From a Thomaston resident, please pray for Sean for healing, and for James fighting Covid-19,

Also continued prayers for Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.*

A Benediction

*May God bless you and keep you.
May God's face radiate upon you
and flood you with grace and tender mercies.
May God smile upon you always
and cover your life with peace.
Amen.*

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary) for Sunday, December 27, 2020 – the first Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40

Words to ponder today about “love”.....

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.” ~ Lao Tzu

“Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own.”

~ Robert A. Heinlein

“Love is like the wind, you can't see it but you can feel it.” ~ Nicholas Sparks

[1]Barbara Brown Taylor, “Mothers of God,” in *Gospel Medicine*, 1995, p. 153.