Messengers: The Son Memory Verse: Matthew 28:20

Dec. 24th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Psalm 51

SLIDE 1 : TITLE

 Once again, we gather together to hear from the messengers of Advent; those servants of the Lord who faithfully deliver God’s word. We started with Gabriel who brought very strange but very good news to a young woman named Mary. He proclaimed that nothing is impossible for God! Then Mary herself took up the megaphone and relayed to us the importance of having a ready heart. She accepted God’s plans by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, emerges from the wilderness delivering a message: “Repent! Change the way you live! Produce good fruit!”

 “Nothing is impossible for God”

 “I am the Lord’s servant…”

 “Repent!”

These are life-changing, worldview altering messages…if we take the time to listen…if we have ears to hear. And on this Christmas Eve, we join with Mary, the Lord’s servant, and Joseph her faithful fiancée, as she prepares to literally deliver into this world, the Word of God, the Word himself, Jesus Christ. This newborn baby, this impossible child, lives and breathes in human skin as the pinnacle of God’s word, the central point of Advent, the meaning of life itself. Tonight, this Christmas Eve, we will once again welcome this baby into our lives and into our hearts. But before we do the welcoming, we must do the preparing. Just as we prepare our homes to accommodate guests, so we must prepare our hearts to accommodate the greatest guest, the Word of God himself. So how do we do that? How can we prepare for such eminent royalty to grace the central throne of our lives?

**SLIDE 2: We listen to the messengers.**

The answer is: We listen to the messengers.

 We begin with a statement of faith: Nothing is impossible for God! A virgin can give birth, a sinner can be forgiven, a villain can be transformed, a soul can be redeemed, a stubborn heart can be softened: Nothing is impossible for God!

 When we commit ourselves to such a faith, we can follow it up with a recognition of our role as the Lord’s servant. In faith, we remain open to his commands, willing to follow his will. In faith, we allow our Heavenly Father to call the shots. A good servant is a willing servant.

 Once we are grounded in the faith that our God can do impossible things, once we understand our role as his willing servants, we have but one thing left to do: repent. Change our hearts and lives. Repentance means that we take stock of our lives, the things we do, the things we say, even the things we think. We take it all and we hold it all up to the standard of God’s holiness and we compare. What does not line up here? What in my life is contrary to God’s will? What am I doing or thinking that separates me from fellowship with God? King David in Psalm 51 lays out a beautiful rubric for repentance:

1. Right away in verse one, David asks God for mercy! This request includes a full-on admission of wrongdoing. I am a sinner, there is no avoiding it. I have done evil and I need forgiveness. So God, I come before you as a sinner in need of grace.
2. As a result of sin, God renders judgement. Sometimes we have consequences to face due to our wrong actions. In verse four David admits that God’s judgement and punishment is fair.
3. Yet, in spite of potential consequences, God mercifully brings about transformation in our lives. These are the impossibilities that our faith tells us are possible! According to David, crushed bones can rejoice again, a sinful heart can be made whiter than snow, the joy of salvation can return…these are among the benefits of our repentance. We call it transformation: life change, heart change.
4. Finally, after this experience of confessing and receiving forgiveness, we end up with a broken and contrite heart; something that God can work with.

So as we approach Christmas with brokenness, with a contrite heart, we are prepared to receive our most honored guest, we are prepared to properly welcome in the Christ child, Jesus, the very Word of God himself. Usually to turn to Luke and read his account of Christmas. His version is the more story-like, the most detailed but today I want to read John’s version of the Christmas story: READ John 1:1-18

**SLIDE 3-8: John 1:1-18**

The eternal, divine, uncreated Word became flesh and he has made God known. Jesus had made the word of God known. He is not a prophet like all the other prophets, and yet he is like all the prophets. He is not a priest like all the other priests, and yet he is like all the priests…he is not a king like all the other kings, and yet he is like all the kings. Jesus is God and yet he could not function as our boldest prophet, our most faithful priest and our greatest king unless he were one of us. He could not take on our sin and bear our shame unless he were one of us.

 And now that the Word of God has been made known to us, impossible things can happen. I’m sure you have heard the phrase “truth is stranger than fiction”. I don’t think we really know who first said it, some say it came from Lord Byron’s novel “Don Juan” written in the 1820’s. But the Mark Twain, the great American writer of the next generation, expanded on that idea. He said, “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it’s because fiction is obligated to stick to possibilities; truth isn’t.”

**SLIDE 9: “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it’s because fiction is obligated to stick to possibilities; truth isn’t.”**

Truth is not obligated to possibilities…That’s pretty good for an atheistic author. I don’t know if you have ever seen or heard of the headline quizes. It’s the kind of thing you are likely to come across online. You are simply presented with various headlines, and you have to decide if they are true or not. Here are a few examples from a quiz put out by a newspaper called The Guardian: True story or made up?

**SLIDE 10: NASA is installing internet on the moon.**

NASA is installing internet on the moon. True!

**SLIDE 11: Artist sells invisible sculpture for 12,000 pounds**

Artist sells invisible sculpture for 12,000 pounds. True!

**SLIDE 12: Canadian zoo fined after taking bear out for ice-cream**

Canadian zoo fined after taking bear out for ice-cream. True! Maybe you can see where I am going with this:

**SLIDE 10: Baby jesus**

Young virgin gives birth to Son of God. True! Eternal salvation made available to all. True! Death itself swallowed up in victory! True! Truth is not obligated to stick to possibilities. These are things you couldn’t write in a novel…they are just too believable. But interestingly, The Guardian, who puts out this little game, encourages participants to always consider the source from which they get their news. We are supposed to ask: it a trustworthy source? Are those doing the reporting credible? Can the Bible stand alongside these other headlines as a reliable news source? I think it can, I think it has and I think there is no other news that is more important to share. The truth is stranger than fiction.

Just take a look through this passage and note all the complete and utter impossibilities: Verse 2: The Word was with God in the beginning. The Word is eternal, timeless, and yet the Word enters into a very time sensitive process called pregnancy when every week is counted down. Notes are taken about all the changes and growth that happen within those nine months. Yet how can an eternal being undergo changes in a physical process that has a built-in deadline? Verse 3, “Everything came into being through the Word.” Through Jesus, God created the heaven and the earth. John makes this extra clear with his opening line: “In the beginning.” Sounds a lot like Genesis. So we face another impossible situation; that of the Creator being created. The Creator being knit together in his mother’s womb. The Creator being sustained by a normal run-of-the-mill umbilical cord. This Word brings light. Verse 9, this light shines on all people and was coming into the world.” This is the very definition of Advent. It means arrival. So how is it that an omnipresent God could be arriving anywhere? Then in verse 12, you and I are actually included in this list of impossibilities. Those who believe in his name, the precious and powerful name of Jesus, undergo an authorized adoption! We become God’s children and even more so, we are born again, not from flesh and bone, but from the Spirit of God. Verse 14: The Word became flesh, God became man, the Creator becomes creation, the holy becomes common, the source of life comes to die. We will never understand the implications of this impossible miracle. We can only stand in awe of is mystery. Finally, verse 18: The unknown had become known. The invisible has been revealed. The imperceptible can now be perceived. God has made himself known. Hallelujah!

 Basically this whole section in John, his version of the Christmas Story is complete nonsense, it’s foolishness. It is riddled with impossibilities and preposterous statements. And yet, we stand upon a faith the declares, “Nothing is impossible for God” and these preposterous, unbelievable statements somehow ring true. Faith declared that they must be true! Truth is stranger than fiction.

Now that he is here, what message does Jesus deliver? Let’s skip to the end and find out. Matthew 28:20, the very last verse of Matthew’s gospel sums it up beautifully. As he physically departs from this word, Jesus says these words: “Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

**SLIDE 14: “Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”**

 That is what Emmanual means, “God is with us!” So in all the impossibilities that Gabriel talks about, in our desire to be God’s faithful servant like Mary was, and as we turn in repentance like John calls us to do, Jesus stands as the final messenger of Advent to deliver this word from God: “I am with you always.” In your failures, in your doubts, in your weakness, I am with you. In the darkness, I am with you. In the loneliness, I am with you. In the grinding of the gears, in the loss of temper, in the times when you just don’t want to what is right…I am with you always. This is the ultimate promise of God. We never have to tackle faith and servanthood and repentance or any day of the week alone. Jesus Christ came to dwell among us, he came to share our trials, he came to provide us a way back to God. Through Jesus, the final Word of Advent, we are never alone, never abandoned, never forsaken.

I would like to turn once more to the words of Alfred Delp, writing from his prison cell as we awaited trial for resisting the Nazi regime as he served a local church in Munich. Isolated in his cell, hands bound and stomach empty, Delp is committed to his faith. He tries to write as much as he can, tries to remain strong in prayer. He names a piece of bread as the greatest blessing or the times his guard mercifully leaves his handcuffs attached more loosely. Alfred as a man of faith. He believed the words of the angel Gabriel, that God can do impossible things. He believed that he could be set free from his sentence no matter what his situation looked like on paper. And like Mary, Alfred was committed to serving the Lord with his life. He wanted to do God’s will, and like John, Alfred understood the importance of repentance. Indeed, while a prisoner, Alfred was able to see more clearly the ways in which he had lived to serve himself. He had a certain attitude of which he needed to repent. Alfred knew that even while under lock and key, through repentance, he could be truly set free.

And the final word of Advent, the final message coming from the Word of God himself: “I am with you always.” Really? Really? Here in a Nazi prison? Here in the bombed out cities? Really Jesus you are here in the depths of depression, here in the fakery of suberbia? Jesus, are you here in the midst of my doubts? Are you here when the bills are piling too high and health is declining and…and...and? Jesus, I can’t see you.

Hear these words from Alfred Delp written in 1945 shortly before he was to hang: “There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up.”

**SLIDE 15: “There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up.”**

Delp argues, that we have become too comfortable. Maybe we don’t see Jesus because we don’t even need to bother to look for him. What we need is a genuine shake up. Delp goes on: “We have stood on this earth…in false security; in our spiritual insanity we really believed we could , with the power of our own hand and arm, bring the stars down from heaven and kindle flames of eternity in the world. We believe that with our own forces we could avert the dangers and banish night, switch off and halt the internal quaking of the universe. We believed we could harness everything and fit it into a final order that would stand.” That, according to Delp, is the sate of mankind. We live with a false security, we live in a state of, what he calls, spiritual insanity. We think we have it all together, that control is within our grasp…until we are shaken.

I believe Advent provides us the cure for this insanity. Advent calls us to have faith in God’s impossible power, not our own. We commit to serve him with our lives, not ourselves, we turn from sin in favor of forgiveness and new life and, come Christmas morning, we welcome in the One who is actually in control. We bow before him in gratitude and wake up the following day claiming the impossible promise, that our God is with us. So we will not worry. We will not loose hope. When we are shaken , we will stand fast on the promises of God’s Word, faithfully spoken by his messengers. Merry Christmas! Amen.