

“Nothing Will Be Impossible with God”  
Luke 1:26-38  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville  
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I want to say a word this morning about EXCESS.  
Excess...you know what that means, right?

To have too much of something, more than you need.  
To exhibit behavior that’s beyond the norm, excessive.

Excess can be a good thing or it can be a greedy thing or it can be a harmful thing or a silly thing...

It just all depends on what it is that is excessive...

The preacher Lillian Daniel describes a time a number of years ago when a beloved member of her church died.

This member was known for her cooking at the church.  
And she left behind more than ONE THOUSAND cookbooks.

So the cookbooks were offered to the church, and members of Daniel’s church could take whatever cookbooks they wanted.

Daniel describes one that she chose.  
It was published in 1966.  
She chose it because of the title.  
The title was this:

*Martinis and Whipped Cream:  
The New Carbo-Cal Way to Lose Weight and Stay Slim.*

“With this proven method,” wrote the author, “you may eat as much as you’re eating now, fried foods, appetizers, gravies, sauces, dressings, caviar, ice cream, even eat between meals, and you should lose weight safely and stay slim naturally.”

Now as you may have guessed, this cookbook was an early attempt at giving folks a low-carb diet, trying to get the reader to avoid sugars and starches. But the proposed menu was FASCINATING:

- Breakfast: Four or five ounces of beef, kidneys, lamb, fish, or bacon. One slice of dry toast.
- Lunch: Five or six ounces of meat, any vegetable except potato, one slice of dry toast, two or three glasses of...sherry wine.
- Supper: Three or four ounces of meat and a glass or two of wine.
- Nightcap: Gin, whiskey, or wine.

How many of you think that diet will work?  
Right.

And how many of you think that a diet of protein, fat, and alcohol all the time is...excessive?

It’s easy to laugh at that cookbook today.  
But for those who took it seriously in 1966, Daniel has some sympathy.

She remarks:

**“It’s...difficult to see excess when you’re in the middle of it.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> As told by Lillian Daniel in her sermon, “Extravagance,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2014.

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Now I think that's right.  
**It's difficult to see excess when you and I are in the middle of it.**

It can happen with anything.  
 Food, football, money...work...

When the well-known writer and priest Henri Nouwen checked himself into a Trappist monastery for seven months, it was because he had spent so much time writing lectures on prayer that he didn't have time to pray. And yet while complaining about all the demands on his schedule, he paradoxically found himself afraid to be alone.

He writes:

“I started to see how much I had fallen in love with my own compulsions and illusions, and how much I needed to step back...”<sup>2</sup>

**It's hard, so hard to see excess when we're right in the middle of it.**

Maybe that's why our text caught me by surprise.  
 It's a familiar story.

The angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus.

How many of you have heard this story before?  
 Right.

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery*, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1976, as quoted in *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life*, by M. Craig Barnes, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009.

It's the story of the announcement of Jesus' birth.  
One of the most famous miracles of all.

But is the annunciation all that this story is about?  
More to the point: is that the ONLY miracle that gets described in  
this text?

How many miracles do you remember hearing when you heard this  
story?

The more time I spend with this story,  
the more miracles, the more gifts of God,  
the more gracious EXCESS of God I think we can find.

For example, before we get to the miracle of HOW Jesus will be  
born, we have a miracle of WHO. The first thing God does is send  
Gabriel to Mary with a message:

*“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”*

Do you recall Mary's reaction to that greeting?

“But she was much perplexed by his words, and pondered what  
sort of greeting this might be.”

In other words, Mary is mystified.

Mary has been chosen by God, selected by God, blessed by God—  
with no reason to think she should be!

She's just a teenager!

Mary is poor, she may be illiterate, she's from a backwater town  
called Nazareth, she's a woman in a culture dominated by men...and  
God says:

I FAVOR YOU.  
 I BLESS YOU.  
 I CHOOSE YOU...

**This is, by my reckoning, the first miracle of our text.**

God choosing the LEAST LIKELY person.

God going to someone on the FRINGES of society, someone with no power and no prestige and no place...and for reasons that only God can see, God calls her “Favored one.”

So—that’s the first miracle.

Then there’s the miracle of the birth announcement—the HOW...and we’ll call that miracle number two.

But THEN there’s the miracle of WHAT...WHAT this child will be.

It’s not just that Mary will have a child, but this child “will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end...he will be called Son of God.”

That’s three miracles in this text so far, and yet...and yet... I was wrong about the first miracle.

I overlooked the FIRST MIRACLE.  
 How does the text begin?

“In the sixth month...”  
 In the sixth month of what?

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.  
Who is Elizabeth?

The cousin of Mary, the older cousin,  
the one who, according to our text, "was said to be barren."

That's a miracle of WHERE.

The story of Jesus' birth, according to Luke, doesn't begin with Mary. It begins SOMEWHERE ELSE, with someone else, with an entirely separate miracle taking place.

So what are we up to?

Four?

We've got four miracles on our hands.

The how, the who, the what, the where...

But we're not done yet.

Gabriel's final words provide the most astonishing news of all:

"And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son..." –that's miracle number FOUR.

**"For nothing will be impossible with God."**

That's miracle number FIVE.

That's the miracle of WHY.

Why is God doing all these things?

Because nothing will be impossible with God.

Because it's in the character and nature of God to be excessive with grace.

I never noticed all the grace and goodness that God was up to in this text, not growing up, not in seminary, not when I started in ministry!

Do you see what's going on?

**It's difficult to see excess, to see extravagance—  
not just when it comes to work or money—  
it's also difficult to see it when it comes to God's grace.**

And it's especially hard right now, isn't it?

- With the news that's coming out of Israel and Gaza, it's hard.
- With the temperature rising in our country's politics—get ready for another Presidential election next year—it's hard.

It can be hard to see the excess and the extravagance of the grace of God that the Gospel says is all around us, especially when the news feels rather hopeless.

So I was going to tell you today:  
Keep your eyes peeled for signs of hope.  
That's a good Advent message.  
Stay awake! Be alert!  
Be on the lookout for what God is going to do.

But then I had another thought.

What if the most HOPEFUL thing that you and I could do today—  
today is the First Sunday of Advent, and the Advent candle  
we lit this morning stands for what?

Hope, that's right.

So what if the most hopeful thing we can do is to believe and trust that we live every day in an excess of God's grace.

To trust that we live with more grace than we can ever measure or remember or even see. And I may hear the news and not see it, and I may experience an awful event in my own life, and not believe it.

But I'm still going to live like it's true.

What if the most hopeful thing we can do this Advent season is  
*erring on the side of grace.*

Do you know what I mean when I say that?  
Erring on the side of grace?

I believe that in the next three weeks, as we get closer to Christmas, everyone in this room will have a decision or two to make.

You might find yourself, at some point, impatient with a stranger.  
You might be wounded by someone in your family, at some point later this month.

You could feel alone or helpless about something going on in your life or your family's life, and there may be nothing you can do to change it.

And you'll be tempted to retreat into your own little world.  
And tempted to believe that hope is hard to find.

But what would happen if, instead of living in that world of scarcity, you and I lived in a world of abundance this Advent?

I don't mean abundance of consumerism and consumption.  
I mean an abundance of grace.



Live in a world in which your cup is overflowing with God's grace, so that whenever you have to make a decision—  
 about how to respond to someone else,  
 or how you're going to spend your time,  
 or how much money you're going to give away,  
 or how much forgiveness you're going to offer,  
 or how gentle you will be with your words...  
 you err on the side of grace.

Do you know what that looks like?  
 To err on the side of grace?

I recall someone who was a friend to my family back in Michigan, when my siblings and I were growing up. I say she was a friend of our family, but she was like family. She was a grandmother to one of my sister's best friends, and she treated us like we were her family too.

One evening we had her over for dinner, and I'll never forget the story she told us about a much earlier time in her life.

It was about her experience as a young nurse at the end of WWII. She was in Madison, Wisconsin, part of the psychiatric unit at Wisconsin General Hospital.

Valentine's Day was approaching, and the nurses were informed that they were needed, needed for a dance with soldiers at the VA hospital across the lake.

Well, of course she would go.  
 Dancing with soldiers on Valentine's Day?

Even if those soldiers were being treated for what we now call PTSD, or some other unknown ailment, it would be an HONOR to

dance with those who had fought the Nazis, defeated the Axis powers, secured our country's freedom and peace.

Our friend showed up at the dance.  
There were soldiers there, all right.  
And they were suffering from a variety of ailments, it was true.

But she and the other nurses were STUNNED.  
Because the soldiers they were being asked to dance were not in their late teens or 20s.

They were the age of their fathers.  
They were veterans of WWI.

What to do?  
Do you leave the dance?  
Do you go back to the other side of the lake, and say, "Well, THAT was a big misunderstanding..."

That's not what those nurses did.

Our friend and her fellow nurses danced the night away with those hurting WWI veterans on Valentine's Day.

You know what they were doing, right?  
They weren't just dancing.  
They were erring on the side of grace.

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Have you put any thought into the gifts that you will give this Christmas?

If you have, if you've put together your list, I hope you have not forgotten to put "erring on the side of grace" on that list. And if you do

that, if you put erring on the side of grace on your list of gifts to give...you're going to have to decide who to give that grace to, and how much to give.

Do you want to give the right amount,  
a perfectly proportioned amount of grace,  
not too little, but not too much?

Will you give that gift only to people whom you feel deserve your grace?

Or will you give it freely and unconditionally, to anyone and everyone, even to those who think really don't deserve it?

If you and I made a point to err on the side of grace every day for the 22 days of Advent this year, and you gave that grace to everyone, and you didn't measure it out ahead of time, but just erred on the side grace with WILD ABANDON...would it feel like too much?

Like your behavior had become...excessive?

Or would it feel...like hope?

Like you were getting ready for Jesus to be born into your heart anew?

(Amen.)