



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Longing for Light...We Hear “Not Impossible”Redefined

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 21, 2008

First Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Luke 1:26-38

During these days of Advent, our worship and proclamation has been focused around a central theme: *Longing for Light*. Last week we talked about our need to point to Jesus as we long for the light. Two weeks ago we talked together about the good news that John the Baptist, quoting Isaiah before him announced, about how God was coming and that all creation would prepare the way for God’s arrival.

But I suspect, for many of us anyway, the theme of *Longing for Light* is marked by our focus from week one. Do you remember week 1, when we asked with Isaiah for God to tear open the heavens and come down to save us? On week 1, we dared to face the truth: *Longing for light...we wait in darkness*.

Darkness—what do you say to someone afraid of the dark? There is good news: there are words that have power over the darkness. Repeat the words to yourself as you lie in bed.

We are familiar enough with the power of darkness, aren’t we, which is why the refrain of *longing for light* rings so true. If we are honest with ourselves, in spite of the relentless cheeriness of this season and our determination to be in the Christmas spirit, a few of us may find ourselves in this season with a bit of dark anxiety, or sadness, or dread dancing like sugarplums over our heads. Unhappy interactions with our loved ones, and words we wish we'd never said and know we can never take back...the fear that lurks behind our success, and the knowledge that our security rests on the whim of the markets ... the uncertainties of health, or worse, the certainties of illness ... the conviction that our best intentions are feeble indeed, and that our real selves below the surface are puny, self-absorbed, slightly fraudulent ... the skepticism we feel at the world's scattered attempts at fairness, at peace-making, at justice. Oh, there will be some who come into this season well equipped with hope and joy, and thank God for them: we need their voices echoing with confidence, their lives decking the halls of our days with laughter. But others of us...well, others of us know the power of darkness all too well, and, if anything, its intimacy breathes all the more closely at Christmas. And it makes us wonder: what can dispel the darkness that we long to shake off of our souls?

I want to suggest that the power of words, or better said, the power of The Word, may well be the antidote for us as well, the dispeller of the darkness that can haunt us. I like what I read in an essay written by Rick Spalding. He wrote about how he sees the possibility of one particularly strong, authoritative statement deeply imbedded in the familiar words of our text today. He draws our eye to the parting words of Gabriel to the stunned young virgin, Mary: "For nothing is impossible with God."

In a twist that helps me see what's really being said here, he reminds us that liter-

ally this verse is rendered, "*because not impossible will be every word with God.*" And then he writes, "I like the way [that literal translation] gets the two little (sounds) *not* and *im*, right next to each other where they can have their elemental clash and, perhaps, work that odd alchemy that has mystified me ever since arithmetic: making positivity out of two negatives."

He goes on, "Certainly there will be a multitude of negatives that come with us to Advent... –skepticism, bitter uncertainties, despair and cynicism, lurking at the outer edges of the warm circle we make around what we hope is true. ... *Not ... impossible ...* I feel as if I'm saying it over and over again, as one of those keeping-warm mantras while hopping one foot to the other in front of a little fire....*Not... impossible...'*

Are these magic words? There are, of course, no such things outside of fiction. We do not control the world, for good or ill, by what we say, nor do we force the will of God by what we wish. Nonetheless, words do have power, and we are strengthened and fortified by the mere remembering of what is good and right and true. That essay reminds us of the courage we gain by staying with these words, this hope, even when it seems most improbable. "If we should say this creed in all our occasions of life, joy and hope, maybe we should whisper it, too, in all our occasions of despair, emptiness and irritation. ...*Not impossible that this day could find its way home, not impossible that these people could be God's beloved children, not impossible that this waiting could be fruitful, not impossible that these policies could change. Why am I here, knowing what I know about myself? Because not impossible... Why are you here, knowing what's perfectly obvious about the world? Because not impossible...*"

Undoubtedly, some people come to this season already brimming with the conviction that God is near, and all is well, and peace is just moments away. But there must also be room, that author reminds us, for other people to bring "in the waning days of Advent their *nots* and their *ims*. And maybe if we were to let the carols subside and back off with the cheer and forswear every easy answer we could lay our hands on, what we'd hear is the monumental clanking together of *not* and *impossible*, beating against each other, beating out an anguished psalm of unanswered prayer, beating out the injustice that craves reversal and beating out the arrogance that cries out to be brought low, beating out old memories and sorrows and unfinished things against the ice that seems to have formed over the wellspring of goodness and mercy, beating loneliness against loneliness until they companion each other, beating *not* and *im* against each other and beating them into ploughshares to furrow the frozen time and make it conceive."

It is, in the end, rarely in the fortuitous, the easy, the carefree times that the Word of God comes stealing in. It is in the difficult and improbable circumstances of real fear and legitimate sorrow and palpable uncertainty that God's promise appears. It is against the "impossible" that the "not" is juxtaposed.

"Not impossible" is God's word to us, and our word to ourselves, to stave off whatever cold or darkness threatens to undo us. "Not impossible" is the word that gives us hope, that lets us know that we are not standing on our own against the forces, that draws us near the warmth and fire and strength of God. "Not impossible will be every word with

God": there are indeed words that have power against the darkness; and there is no greater power than the Word of God, the Word made flesh, that came to dwell among us.

Words have power; God's Word has power, to bring comfort, and hope, and maybe, above all, courage. And so it has been from the beginning. We forget, I suppose, in the sweetness of the carols and the beauty of the art, how deeply terrifying Gabriel's appearance must have been to Mary on that fateful day 2000 years ago. That she should bear a child without benefit of husband; that she should risk being shunned by her community; that she should, of all things, be the chosen one to bear the Son of God: it must have been completely overwhelming for this teenage girl. What on earth inspired her to say yes to Gabriel, to say, okay, I may not understand, but I am willing, to say to him, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your Word"? I like to think that maybe, just maybe, it was the angel's final word to her: "For not impossible is every word with God."