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Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“According to Your Word”

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I say the words every week: “*who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man.*” (Nicene Creed) I say those words with you every week, and I say them far too lightly. Do you realize what we’re saying with those words? The mystery that has been revealed to us to utter? That God – the eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present God – has come down to us and is born in human flesh? He didn’t have to! He really wanted to. (John 10:15, 17) To be with us, as one of us, to save us. Not to be a big, sovereign God, far, far away; but to be our brother and friend. To live with us, suffer with us, cry with us, eat with us, talk with us, and especially die for us. To, in all these ways, love us. To love us, even though we do not love Him as we should. To love us, even though we continue to rebel and sin against Him. To love us, even though we be unlovable. And when the angel Gabriel came to Mary that day in Nazareth, that’s what happened. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. (John 3:16) God became a man.

You see, Christmas didn’t really happen in Bethlehem, with the no vacancy signs on the inns, the stable, the manger, the animals, the shepherds, and all of that. It really happened nine months earlier in Nazareth – a place so insignificant that it was proverbial that no good thing could come out of it! (John 1:46) But that’s how God works. Creating something out of nothing. And so, it turns out, something good *does* come out of Nazareth – a baby, conceived in a virgin. ***For nothing is impossible with God.***

You know, I say those words too lightly as well. ***Nothing is impossible with God.*** It’s hard to believe. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I believe that the angel Gabriel came to Mary and spoke to her, and that through the Word of God that he spoke, the Son of God was conceived in the womb of Mary. I believe that Word created the faith in Mary so that she was able to say, “***Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.***” I believe all that! . . . It’s the other stuff. The stuff in my life, the stuff in your life, the stuff that *seems* too big, too tough, too much. The faith-shaking stuff. The continual struggles, the sin that we can’t seem to shake, the failure, the doubt, the grief,

the questions. God did great things in the Bible! All those miracles. People were changed. ***Nothing is impossible with God.*** . . . So why not here? Why not now? Why not with you and me and our problems?

Well, to answer that, we need to take a closer look at the Gospel for today, and what took place between Gabriel and Mary. And specifically, what was *said*. Because the phrase ***“Nothing is impossible with God”*** is actually not the best translation of what Gabriel really said. It’s not bad or wrong – the problem is that it’s too vague; it’s too general. Of course nothing is impossible with God! He’s God! Just saying that really doesn’t say anything, it doesn’t give us any comfort, and in fact, Satan can use those kinds of general, vague, and sweeping statement against us, convincing us that oh yes, those words are true *in general*, but not for you *specifically*. For yes, **God is love** – but does He love *you*? Yes, God saved the world – but will He save *you*? Yes, **nothing is impossible with God** – but what does that mean that He’s going to do *for you*? And with such deception and devices, Satan seeks to separate us from God, creating a God we really don’t know, and really can’t know, and really can’t trust in. And when we listen to those words, our sin and unworthiness and doubt often get the better of us.

So what did Gabriel say that enabled Mary to respond with so much faith? That took away her doubts and fear? What He literally said was, ***“For no word from God shall be without power.”*** And with those words, Gabriel is not just stating something in general, but making a particular promise to Mary: *that God will work out all the confusion and fear that His words have just brought into your life*. For His Word does what it says. No Word from God is without power. How can a virgin conceive? *By His Word!* How can something good come out of Nazareth? *By His Word!* How can little Mary’s son sit on the Throne of David, and not just for a time, but forever? *By His Word!* How can Mary do this – be pregnant, face Joseph, face the shame and shunning, raise the Son of God? *By His Word!* For His Word is power. His Word has power. . . . And did Mary get that? Yet bet! That’s why she didn’t just say: “OK!” No, she too responded very specifically: ***“Let it be to me according to your word.”*** In that moment, faith takes hold of the promise made. Mary gives herself up to the Word of God.

And then, ***“the angel departed from her.”*** I bet she wished he would have stayed a while longer! Answered some questions she probably had. But God does not tell us all the answers – all the who, what, where, when, why, and hows! *He bids us instead to believe.* To believe not in the answers, but in His goodness. In His promises. In His faithfulness. That whatever your situation, no matter how powerless, helpless, confused, or troubled you might be; that even if you’re like Mary, confronted with things you cannot possibly see working out; and that even overwhelmed by doubts and fears, heartaches and worry about the future – to believe, that ***no Word from God is without power.***

And so God spoke and said the virgin would be with child, and she was. God spoke and said that old barren Elizabeth would be pregnant, and she was. No Word God has ever spoken lacks power. He said **“Get up”** (John 11:43) and the dead got up. He said **“Be clean”** (Mark 1:41) and the lepers were cleansed. He said **“Be gone”** (Matthew 17:18) and the devils left. He said **“I forgive you”** (Matthew 9:2) and sinners were forgiven. . . . And still today. If God says **“Be healed”** you will be. If God says **“Be happy”** you will be. If God says **“Job troubles be gone”** they'll go. If He says **“Family crisis be solved”** it will be. Those words might be at the tip of His tongue right this very minute. I don't know and neither do you. Mary didn't know how all her worries and troubles would work out either. But what did she go by? **Not by words God had not yet spoken, but by the ones He had.** And so too for you. The Words God has *already said to you*, not ones He hasn't, will give you the strength, the courage, the faith, and the peace you need to face your future, whether it's happy or sad.

So listen to what has your Lord already said to you; the Word that He has given you to live by. He has said to you, **“Be baptized and you will receive the Holy Spirit.”** (Acts 2:38) Just as Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, so you too have the promise of the Holy Spirit – not to conceive a son, but to conceive in you the faith that makes you God's son or daughter. And so you do not have to worry yourself sick over the future, or where you're going to get the courage, strength, or faith to face what lies ahead. You have a Father taking care of that, who has promised to give all you need.

God has also told you, **“I forgive your sins.”** (John 20:23; Colossians 3:13) I've taken all your sins and placed them on Jesus, and I've taken all Jesus' holiness and put it on you. A great exchange. And if God said it, its done – just like God told Mary **“You're pregnant”** and she was. I'm quite sure that at that very moment, Mary didn't *feel* pregnant. You may not *feel* forgiven. But that doesn't make it not true. What Mary or you or I *feel* doesn't matter. God's Word does. God's Word which does what it says. ***For no Word from God is without power.***

Again today God will say, **“Take, eat; this is My body. Take, drink; this is My Blood. Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”** (Matthew 26:26-28) And just as God's Word made the flesh and blood of His Son a reality in Mary, so too His Word makes it a reality here, for you. That you are what you eat. That you would live in God and He in you. That His power would be made perfect in your weakness. That His life would live in you. That here in this Divine Service, this altar each week becomes the throne and kingdom of David, the very Son of David and Son of God, ruling and reigning in our hearts and lives through His forgiveness and grace.

And think of all the other promises of God that have been given to you in His Word! And like Mary, cling to these. ***“Let it be to me according to your word.”*** Let your life be not in what *may* be or *might* be, but on what has been promised to you. Not in what you feel or can see, but on the sure and certain foundation of the Word of God. The Word that this season especially we remember was a Word not just spoken, but a Word that became flesh. Our flesh. To be with us, as one of us, to save us. And did He save us? We have His Word on that too, when He said: ***“It is finished.”*** (John 19:30) And it was. No Word of God without power, even when spoken by a dying man hanging from a cross. The resurrection proved the power of those words, and your resurrection proves the power of God’s Word all well. *Both* your resurrection now, from a life dead in sin to a new life in Christ; and your resurrection at the end, from the short and difficult life of this world, to the rest of life eternal in Heaven.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Christmas is a holiday that so often gets buried under a whole avalanche of stuff! And the words we hear and say become so cliché. Do not let it be with the life-giving Word of God. You don’t have to know it all, and don’t make yourself feel guilty for not! Cling to what you know and have heard. Cling, like Mary, to the Word of promise given to you. Cling to the Word, which is not generic and vague, but which at a very specific place and a very specific time, became man. For you. Because He promised that He would. Because He really wanted to. Because He really wanted you. Cling to Him. Merry Christmas!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to the Rev. Paul Harris of Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, TX for some of the thoughts and phrases used in this sermon.)