

Dec. 18, 2011

“Punching Holes”

Luke 1:26-38

I read once where, when God wants to do something huge, when God wants to turn history on its axis and gouge a large exclamation point in the sky, God begins with certain impossibilities. God uses nobodies, people with small desperate lives to move great mountains. God breaks all the rules and colors outside the lines. What audacity! God talks to us in whispers, not with loud shouts...and through impossibilities, not through logic! It makes no sense whatsoever.

We live in a time when power moves the politics and economies of our world. We see it in the news every day. Political, elected officials stiff-arm each other and poke thumb holes in the public machine...because they can. Large corporations drag entire multinational economies around at will...because they can. Big money decides how human families will live, and whether they will eat at night or not...because it can. Bureaucracies stir up small, weak people with their dehumanizing policies. Husbands beat the daylights out of wives...and parents bruise and batter their children because they have the power to. Power is immutable! But nothing now is impossible with God!

This Christmas will not be joyful for everyone. For many it will be a time of grief, of loneliness of loss, of quiet desperation. It will be a time of depression. People without jobs will wonder what 2012 will bring. Some elderly will sit in their warm rooms at the nursing home, the TV slowly turning their brains into oatmeal. Children will be without parents, who are serving in Afghanistan. Families will set an empty chair at the Christmas table...perhaps for the first time. And it seems so incredibly heavy out there, doesn't it? But now God is stirring the impossibilities. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, a light shines in the darkness. The good news I have for you is nothing is able to keep it from shining in the darkness. Nothing! The great 19th century writer Robert Louis Stevenson remembers as a child sitting by a window watching a lamplighter light the gas lamps along the street below. His nurse asked him what he was doing. He said, “I'm watching a man make holes in the darkness.” Today we are reading a story about God who is punching holes in the darkness.

Visitors to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky used to gather in one of the most remote areas in the caverns below. The guide would turn off all the lights, and they would experience total darkness, heavy, eerie and desperate. Once, during one of those visits when the lights were off, a small child cried out in fear. His older brother said, “*Don't be afraid. There's a man who knows where to turn on the lights.*” It is Advent. The good news is, God knows where the light switch is. And who will stop him?

Luke here tells about a slip of a girl, no more important than the town she lives in. She is minding her own business one day when an angel stops by. I myself don't get too many visits from angels. But, then, I'm much more important than Mary was. Mary was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. She was headed for a pretty ordinary life in a pretty ordinary place, until the angel showed up that day to punch holes in our darkness.

We don't know much about Gabriel. He seems to show up whenever God needs a message delivered. "Mary," Gabriel said. "God really admires you." Mary got that deer-in-the-headlights look, because angels don't say stuff like that unless God wants something. So Gabriel said, "Don't be afraid." Just like in Mammoth Cave, when the older brother said, "Do not be afraid. I know a man who knows where the light switch is." Gabriel said, "Don't be afraid. God sees something beautiful in you. Mary, God wants you to give birth to the Holy One of God. Just that. Only that. No pressure."

Mary replied, "But I'm not married. I don't have a husband" And the angel said God's very Spirit would overshadow her. She would bear the Child of God that way. The angel said, "You should know that your cousin Elizabeth—way too old to have kids—is six months along now. You see, nothing is impossible...nothing... when God wants to rock the axis of the universe and punch holes in our darkness." Doesn't it seem strange...that God asks such hard things of people who have so little to give. Mary must have wondered how she would explain it to her fiancé, that she was pregnant with someone else's child. What would she say when she met the town's women at the well each day, those women who would only shake their heads at her, unable to believe the audacity of the little tramp? And her parents? What would she say to them? So Mary was terrified. But she said yes. Let it be so. And that was the remarkable thing about Mary. She knows what faith is. Something holy must have gotten under her skin, leaving her weak enough to trust God, and she said yes.

When God wishes to intrude, God starts with impossibilities, starts with people who have no power, who are weak, foolish and not connected. God begins with empty people, because only empty people know that God must be in charge. Weak people let God be in charge. God makes little things big...big things little, and full things empty and empty things full...because God can. God can do anything.

Nothing is impossible to God. So that we might know that in matters of salvation, *everyone is poor without God*. Power succumbs to weakness when God is in the details. A child is born in the darkness. God help us all!

It is Advent, and God is about to do something amazing. God is punching holes in the darkness. John says the light shines in all our darkness, and the darkness is not able to overcome it. No matter what you do or don't do...no matter who you are or who you are not...no matter how many times this year you succeed or fail...what

you accomplish or don't accomplish, the light of salvation is coming. You can't even stop it! God is lighting candles in our darkness. There is something terribly hopeful about it.

God just keeps coming. Keeps coming and coming. Jesus tells us we are the light of the world. So it is for us to let the light of Christ shine through us. Here, at table, we celebrate the holes that are punched in our darkness. The bread is the Body of Christ, and it declares for us that, as you take it into your bodies, nothing can stop the love of God from entering you through all those holes punched into your darkness. And the cup is the blood of Christ, which forgives in the darkness and accepts you even as you are.

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