

Homily for December 20, 2020, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 9:30 AM Mass

UNPRECEDENTED. THAT'S THE KEY WORD FOR 2020. My mother has said over and over, "I never thought I would see the things that have happened this year." She's 93 so she's seen a lot since her birth in 1927. She's not the only one. "Who'd a thought so many would be sick and dying, or that we'd all be wearing masks everywhere we go, or that the amount of people in our churches would be limited – or even closed as they are in California – or that we couldn't sing AT ALL in Church, especially our beloved Christmas Carols. Silent Night, The First Noel, It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, Joy to the World. Unprecedented. An alternate universe. Completely unexpected.

SCREEN: Special Delivery main screen

And for me, that ties into the final week of our Advent message series titled, Special Delivery. A different kind of unexpected and definitely unprecedented. We are preparing to celebrate Christmas when God sent his Son as the most special delivery of all time. A delivery that can accurately be described as unprecedented, unlike any other. It was so unexpected that it confounded all the experts - left them speechless. Even Mary herself exclaims, "How can this be?" And thus our series culminates with today's Gospel.

I certainly understand the reasons why we can't sing in Church for the fear of spreading the virus. It is one of the many, perhaps smaller, but still unfortunate casualties of this pandemic. And today, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, it's hard for me not to at least be humming, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," that great Advent hymn which is a song of longing and profound faith. It expresses much of what I have felt during these past several months. The end of this pandemic is around the corner, the vaccine will be available to all of us, but in these unprecedented times, it can't come soon enough. **"O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel."** The Hebrew name Emmanuel means "God is with us." It combines the Hebrew expression for "with us" and one of the words for God, El. It refers to the presence of God among us: the great Advent hope. And that title, Emmanuel, emphasizes that even in these unprecedented times, nothing is impossible with God. Emmanuel is coming, and coming soon!

But let's go back in time a bit, before Jesus. In the reading from the Second Book of Samuel, we met David. He was seemingly an insignificant shepherd boy who did something unexpected. He killed the mighty warrior Goliath armed only with a slingshot. Then he grew up and went on to become King, a thousand years before Christ

was born. After being chosen by God to lead His Chosen People, David decided to show his thanks by building God a house, a temple, for God to live in, and God's reply was basically, That's okay, thank you for thinking of me, but no Thank you. God reminds David of all he did for him - raising him up from being a lowly shepherd boy, making him a great commander, defeating all his enemies. God says: *I don't really need you to make me a house.* Instead, God proposed this to David:

SCREEN: “I will raise up your heir after you....I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me. Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever.”

So God was promising David that his “house”, his line would endure forever! The Jewish people interpreted this as a prophecy that when the messiah came, he would be a descendant of David, he would come from the House of David. It would take a thousand years for God's prophecy to be fulfilled, and today's Gospel described the moment it happened.

SCREEN: The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

Again Unprecedented: Mary was an unlikely candidate for such an unprecedented thing to happen: God chose Mary, a very young peasant girl living in a small village in a tiny country. Even she couldn't believe it, nor how it could possibly be, since she wasn't yet married.

But somehow she knew and there is a calm and peacefulness about her when Gabriel tells her that this miraculous unprecedented event would come about by the Holy Spirit. Mary responded with perfect faith and trust, surrendering her doubts and concerns to God. She is a model for us all. If this could happen and if Mary could have faith and trust that God would accomplish this, then we too need to be like Mary. In our darkest moments, we must have faith and trust that *'nothing will be impossible for God'*.

**“O come, Thou Dayspring from on high And cheer us by thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death's dark shadow put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”**

When we think about it, there is a grim darkness to the story of Christ's birth. A family is forced to leave home by the decree of a repressive regime. No one opens the door to the poor migrants. Ultimately Mary is forced to give birth among animals in a dirty barn.

Yes, shepherds and wise men pay their respects, but so do the thugs of a power hungry dictator, who slaughter innocent two year olds. There's no one there to right the wrongs or topple the repressive regime. The members of the Holy Family become refugees, forced to flee because their religious identity and very existence challenge the unjust political order.

Where is the light then? The promise of the birth of Jesus Christ is that God is with us through it all, in pandemics, racial injustice, poverty, homelessness, political division, economic hardship, in the middle of the night in the most lowly circumstances. God is in all things. God's shining light is not extinguished by King Herod's dark deeds then or ours today. In a world of seemingly unending darkness, the miracle and wisdom of the Magi were that they noticed and followed the light at all. The heroism of the shepherds was that they recognized God among them, in the most inauspicious circumstances. In our daily labors, in our difficult nights, in the endless months of this terrible year, our challenge is similar: **to follow the light no matter how deep the darkness**, to recognize the Incarnation and to hear the cry of the tiny divine child. To know that indeed nothing -- like the discovery of a vaccine in nine short months -- nothing is impossible with God.

If we -- you and I -- ever needed to hear the message of Mary, it's now. It's too easy to look at everything you are facing and decide it's impossible, hopeless, can't be fixed, won't get better. Think for a moment about what you personally are struggling with right now that has you feeling hopeless and helpless?

This year has created so many concerns for your own well being or that of your family members. And not just the physical health of each person, but the psychological and spiritual and economic health of each and every individual that is part of your life. I suspect that every person you know is facing something so serious that they may be doubting themselves and questioning their faith - crying out, *'where are you God? What is your plan for me ?'* If this is how you are feeling, what can you do? Today's Gospel gave the answer: be like Mary. Be like Mary; have faith and trust and hear the words of the Angel Gabriel who reassured her,

SCREEN: Nothing will be impossible for God

“O come, Desire of nations, Bind In one the hearts of all humankind; Bid thou our sad divisions cease, And be thyself our prince of Peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

When we sing this, our most familiar Advent hymn, we stand beside David and Luke, and most especially with Mary the Mother of God, and we profess our faith in Jesus as

Emmanuel in the flesh, as God's presence within our common humanity. We also look forward to the fullness of God's presence in his kingdom. The Great Advent hope is expressed in the name "Emmanuel" for God **IS** with us. In our past, in our present and in our future.

If God could do such unprecedented things as turn David, a shepherd boy, into a great King; and if God could raise up Mary of Nazareth to be the Mother of Jesus; and if her son, a carpenter and itinerant preacher, could bring healing and forgiveness to a broken world, then God can fix *anything* you and I struggle with. All that is asked is that we turn our problems over to God, and then trust, believe, and have hope that *Nothing will be impossible for God! That is the real unprecedented truth in an unprecedented year.*

**“O come, Thou Key of David, come, And open wide our heav'nly home,
Make safe the way that leads on high, That we no more have cause to sigh.”**

That we no more have cause to sigh. What causes such a heavy sigh within us each day? In these next few days before Christmas, stop what you are doing now and then and take a quiet pause in your day, **and pray.** Every day, every time we pray, we are called to surrender our problems to God and trust that God is listening. No matter how impossible you've decided your struggle is, give it to God.

So let's try it now. I want to invite you to join me in an act of spiritual surrender. Let us be quiet together so that we can think about whatever struggle is most in our hearts and on our minds right now. Whatever it is that produces feelings of fear, doubt or despair. Whatever it is, think of it, name it. Close your eyes if it makes it easier for you.

(pause for 30 seconds)

Please open your eyes now. Normally on the Fourth Sunday of Advent in the past, I have invited everyone to join me in singing a verse of Silent Night to help us continue to stay in a peaceful mode. Sleep in heavenly peace. Instead, I invite you now to join me in praying this beautiful prayer that Fr. Mike wrote. Let us pray it together:

SCREEN: Lord, I know that you love me.

I trust that you are listening. I have hope that you will answer my prayer.

SCREEN: Like Mary, I surrender my life and struggles to you.

Every day, help me to imitate her example:

to believe that with you,

nothing will be impossible. Amen. +