

Beyond Belief
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2012
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It seems obligatory that I begin with some reference to the fact that the world has not ended. After all, for quite some time now, it has been publicized that the Mayan calendar predicted the end of the world on Friday, December 21, 2012 – there have been movies based on this scenario and plenty of reports about it. And yet, here we all are – no end of the world last Friday – if anything, just a lame approximation of a winter storm. Certainly over the past months there has also been plenty of debunking of the end of the world prediction, either as a misreading of the timing, or explaining that it's simply the marking of new beginning, not destruction but renewal. Still, there was plenty of attention paid to the December 21 countdown, although mostly not so serious – I saw one local station with a weather forecast that listed Friday with a high of 1250degrees and heavy showers of molten lava and flaming meteors. Some were more serious – hundreds flocked to the small French village of Bugarach, waiting to be taken away by aliens rescuing them from the destruction (seriously!). And there were other creative ways of facing the Friday doomsday – on Facebook I saw several folks who were considering putting off various tasks – such as doing laundry; paying bills; and especially, Christmas shopping – figuring that if it all ended on Friday, there would be no need for clean laundry, paid

bills, or Christmas presents – presumably those folks were particularly busy catching up this weekend. So, naturally, I faced the same sort of consideration with this sermon – should I really start before Saturday? – Why not wait and see what happens on Friday? – No need to waste the time if no sermon is needed after all.

But, here's the thing – and a none too subtle sermon application for the day – I actually did start working on my sermon earlier than Saturday – why? – Because I didn't believe that Friday would be doomsday. So what I believed about that, impacted what I did – what I chose to do – how I lived. What someone believes impacts what a person does – or, you could say, what you really believe is shown by how you live. Does that seem an obvious truth? – Perhaps, but I'd like to look at that more closely for a bit: belief and how that shapes our lives.

And I'd like to do that by reflecting on the idea of “Beyond Belief” – as that phrase came to mind for me this week, it struck me as perhaps an interesting possibility for looking at life and belief in various ways – and what I mean, is that depending on how you say it, mean it, “Beyond belief” can in fact express some very different ways of seeing and engaging life.

Try thinking of it this way – sometimes when things are really bad, we say it's beyond belief: ‘I can't believe it’; ‘that's unbelievable’. When we are confronted with difficult news, when we face sudden obstacles and see no way through, it can be hard to soak in the reality. With the families and community of Sandy Hook, we continue to feel the devastation of the horrific killings there – funeral after funeral this past week. And along with it, a search for

answers, for “why?” it is beyond comprehension as to how someone can do this – I cannot fathom such human capacity – it is unbelievable. And if you might think I am naïve, I hope you will not: this “why?” is not a new question – it does no honor to these slain children to try to frame this tragedy as the worst – there is enough horror in it to hear on its own; and the incomprehensibility of it joins in a too long litany of disbelief about human experience for the violence inflicted upon one another. “Why?” is a lament, an indictment, a longing because there is no ‘why’ – the capacity of humanity for destruction is too much to bear – it is beyond belief?

And, at the same time, there are other capacities that shock us in just the opposite way. Sometimes, when we see something really amazing, that can seem beyond belief too. It can be simply an encounter with beauty, with creativity, with skill that makes us wonder how such a thing could come to be – there are all sorts of wonderful and profound examples I know you could come up with, but I have to confess there have been several basketball dunks and soccer goals that I truly stand in wonder at and say: “unbelievable” – although perhaps we can go a bit deeper than that. There is also a human capacity for good that can take our breath away - shock us with beauty. The depth of compassion to those in need; the fullness of courage in seeking justice; the sacrifice of self to give life; the kindness of spirit that holds and lifts up; the capacity for understanding and forgiveness that reconciles and heals; the wisdom of head and heart that illumines a path - at times it all seems beyond us – how can a person be so strong, so rich in heart, so profound? – unbelievable – there is a long litany of human goodness that often

defies circumstance or odds, but continues to emerge and at times prevail. Which, too, can be called naïve – does such capacity really make a difference? – really do something substantial, change things for the better? It can be hard to believe – hard to really give ourselves over to trust that, in the words of the simple, profound prayer and song from Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa: “good is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death” – hard to believe?

...which does take some folks beyond belief in another way – to not believing at all. It has always been the case and remains so that for some people to believe in God is beyond belief – unbelievable; and there are plenty of reasons for that, or sometimes simply not much reason or significance given to it. Belief in God can in itself be a lot of threads to keep woven together – a view of life and self, of meaning and purpose, of divinity and humanity, salvation and hope, redemption and fulfillment – woven into a cord of belief, of faith. Perhaps that is more than some want or need, but sometimes it is the circumstances of life that themselves fray the cord: ‘if such terrible things happen – how can I believe?’; ‘when the world is this way – how can God allow it? – that’s not a God I want to believe in’; or even the things that we would hope in – one could ask if there is more integrity in seeking only science, knowledge, progress as the way to human and planetary redemption rather than belief in God...and many do. A life beyond belief in God is all around us – some seeing that as a license for destruction; others seeing it as a way for humans to take true responsibility – and some too, not sure or not sure why to care, and just trying to get along.

We heard a story today from Luke about beyond belief in another way – a story that says belief is a receiving, a revealing, an accepting, beyond which life is changed. Mary believed already, it's quite clear – God is no new concept; she was a person who was part of a people of faith. And then she is called to believe something very particular – unbelievable, really – as the Chosen one of God, from God, is to be her child. I would, finally, admit to being naïve if I tried to say this is easy to believe...! – for her, or for us, or for anyone who hears the story. This miracle of incarnation – this unique joining of God and humanity – it is unbelievable, that God would do this. And yet here it is – and Mary, only a young woman from Nazareth, at a particular place and time in history, accepts and mothers this promise into being – how can one's life be more profoundly changed? And to this, Cousin Elizabeth says 'bless you, Mary' – 'bless you for believing God's promises would be fulfilled. Belief is a beginning, called beyond into where that faith leads.

This happens only to Mary – there is this unique, one incarnation of God, Emmanuel...but would we believe this is our story too? Yes, our story in the broad sense of the story of faith; no, not our story of Messiah conceived within us – all gender and life-circumstance issues notwithstanding – but yes, our story, in that this hard to fathom event is the very pattern and purpose of belief that is played out again and again, and that summons to be told in us. As unique and miraculous as this story is, I think it holds at its core a belief about who God is; it is a revelation, a receiving that God is with us – God is for us – God is the one who is life and justice and goodness – God is the power of salvation, peace, fulfillment. That's

what Mary believes – and God encounters us with the same word, same revelation, same promise...to believe? Yes - but beyond belief is the lean into that truth, the journey toward where the promises of God lead; belief carries with it the answers of what life looks like in light of the person and promises of God revealed in the Messiah, Jesus Christ...

...and so too it carries with it the questions: how do we face the violence and evil that violate this world and tear at its belief? How can we believe in the people and forces that bring healing and hope? How might we witness to a world beyond believing in God at all?

I was talking with one of you all this week looking ahead already to the Season of Reconciliation upcoming in January – and we both recalled a couple years back when Claire Rumpsa shares some of her story as a Witness to Reconciliation. She spoke of the wonderful faith community of Corrymeela in her native Ireland (and she speaks of it in her delightful accent!), through which God shaped her in the ways of reconciliation, justice and inclusion. And then she concluded by saying: “There is a small sign over the main door of Corrymeela that reads, “Corrymeela begins when you leave.””

That’s what beyond belief is: this story of Mary that tells who God is, is given to us today for us to believe - and that belief begins again when we leave here - taking shape, coming to life, in our lives. As I see that happening in you, I say with Elizabeth – ‘bless you’ – ‘blessed are we as we believe God’s promise will be fulfilled in our lives’. Which takes us to the blessing of Mary’s song - with our sister, the blessed Mother Mary, we carry a song of beauty beyond belief: “my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God

my Savior” – as we leave here, that is the song of promise that begins again in our lives and world – the song that carries us beyond belief and leans us into life. AMEN.