

## Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

24<sup>th</sup> December 2023

First Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

Now when David, the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you, David, that the LORD will make you a house.

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Second Reading: Romans 16:25-27

To God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Gospel: St Luke 1:26 -38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For

nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

### **A Reflection for The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Have you ever done anything extraordinary?

This week, the Lochinver congregation bade farewell to Margaret as we gave thanks for her life and buried her overlooking the sea close to her home at Ardvar. As we were reminded at her funeral service, Margaret certainly did something extraordinary: during the first Covid lockdown, at the age of 90, she climbed the stairs in her house repeatedly until she reached height of Suilven: 731 meters or 2398 feet. Sponsored for her efforts, she raised nearly half a million pounds for NHS Charities, Highland Hospice and the RNLI. It was a remarkable achievement.

But I think that extraordinary achievements are not so rare as we might at first think, and are accomplished by seemingly very ordinary people. People who have endured suffering of many different types with fortitude and lack of complaint. People who have selflessly cared for a loved one unable to look after themselves, sometimes for many years, and often without the support they should be entitled to, a situation over which they often have little choice. Such people are the unsung heroes of our society. I am sure you probably know some people like this, but their achievements are only rarely recognised more widely. Or maybe you know someone whose dedication to their discipline, be it in sport or the arts or something else, has led to extraordinary achievement and widespread recognition.

As we approach Christmas, Luke’s Gospel reminds us that extraordinary faithfulness preceded the birth of Jesus. Prior to today’s passage is the account of Zechariah the priest’s encounter with an angel in the sanctuary of the Temple who told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would become parents in their old age. Inevitably, this would have caused some comment, and the Gospel tells us that Elizabeth remained in seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy. Then, as we have heard over the past two Sundays, their son, John the Baptist, was faithful to his calling as the one who would prepare the way of the Lord.

In today’s passage, the angel comes to Mary to tell her that she will be the mother of God’s Son. We often think of Mary’s response at the end of their exchange, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’, as a model of obedience for us, as indeed it is. But it is also an act of extraordinary faithfulness, of belief and trust in God’s promises both to her and to all of humanity.

Some of us have been spending some time looking at icons of Mary this Advent. In many of these, she is presented in elaborate and symbolic apparel, befitting her exalted status as the mother of God’s Son. In catholic tradition, she is a powerful figure who intercedes with her Son on behalf of humanity; an exceptional woman, holy and obedient, who could respond to God’s call and accept her role as the Mother of God’s Son almost without question.

There is truth in this, but it portrays her as a distant figure and, in a book about icons, Rowan Williams questions whether she is really so remote from us. In the Gospels, she is presented as a person of complete insignificance: an unmarried woman in a patriarchal society, in an occupied country, for whom God’s call has the potential to mark her out as a failure and an outcast. Yet Mary has the humility, the courage, and the love, to risk her safety and her

reputation and answer God's call. In this scenario, she is a very ordinary person being asked to do something extraordinary. In saying 'Yes' to God, the path she chose for her life meant that she knew what it was to be poor, oppressed, a refugee, to see her Son praised and then rejected and finally executed. She endured the shame, standing at the foot of the Cross. But she remained faithful and was still there, among the disciples, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.

Are such things only for other people, for people who are exceptional in some way? We may like to think so, it may seem safer that way, but God calls all of us to be faithful and sometimes the things that God calls us to do can be extraordinary, challenging, and lead to an uncertain future. Think of some of those unsung heroes I mentioned at the beginning, the people who endure, the people who care in circumstances that no-one would plan or desire.

The reality is that what God calls us to do may not be what we expect. That was certainly the case for Mary. It was also true for King David, as we hear in today's passage from the second book of Samuel. David has established himself as king, subdued his enemies and built himself a fine house. He decides it is time to build a house, a Temple, for the Ark of God that contained the tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them that God had given to Moses. But God had different ideas and that task was reserved for his David's son Solomon. Instead, in a neat twist, God will build David into a house, a house or line of descent from which would come the Messiah who would reign forever. It was a promise that was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, though that was probably not how David envisaged its fulfilment at the time.

Both David and, later, Mary believed that God would do what was promised. Mary did not have to say 'Yes' to the angel, she chose to. She caught God's vision of a transformed world, expressed so beautifully later in the words of the Magnificat, and she wanted to be part of it. In accepting, she was transformed from an ordinary young girl into the mother of God's Son, prophet and disciple. She knew that God was with her and that, as the angel said, 'Nothing will be impossible with God'.

As we move from Advent to Christmas, Mary's extraordinary story of faithfulness and transformation also calls us faithfulness and transformation. God, through the incarnation, was willing to change and take on human form so that, through his Son, we might be changed and brought into a new relationship with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just as God promised to be with Mary, so God promises to be with us today. And just as Mary participated in God's plan to bring Jesus into the world, so we are called to participate in bringing Jesus to the world today in the ways that we love and care for all God's people and all of God's creation. Sometimes that will require us to do extraordinary things.