

Advent 4, Year B
Dec. 24, 2017
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

They looked so simple in the magazine.
Just a few simple ingredients:
nutter butter cookies to form the body,
some candy corn, some stick pretzels,
some chocolate kisses to form other body parts,
some frosting to glue everything together and *voila*:
Thanksgiving turkey cookies!
How hard could it be?

At the time I was part of a group from my parish
who spent one evening a month
providing enrichment experiences
to formerly chronically homeless women
living in a group home.
Each month we sought to find some activity or craft
that would engage them, entertain them, stimulate them.
This was all in hopes of bonding with them,
of bridging the chasm
that separated their lives on the margins
from our own more privileged realities.

I had seen pictures of these cookies in a woman's magazine,
and so with Thanksgiving coming,
it seemed like a fun way to spend an evening.

Like so many of life's misbegotten adventures,
the great Thanksgiving turkey cookie saga
began with high hopes
and serious miscalculations.
It ended with the most hideous assortment of
edible barnyard shapes you've ever seen.
Some of them MIGHT have been turkeys, I suppose.
Heaven only knows what some of the others were meant to be.

Trust me when I tell you
that no turkey cookie made that night
was in any danger of winding up on a magazine cover.

Yet for all of that evening's obvious aesthetic failures,
I think it was one of the most fun evenings we ever had together.
We laughed at our mistakes.
And in the end,
the most misshapen turkey
tasted just as good as the prettiest one.

Because, of course, it wasn't really the cookies that mattered.
What mattered was the experience of doing it together.

Maybe some of you have spent some time this month
making Christmas cookies.
Maybe you've made them with your children or grandchildren.
You and I both know you can go to Costco
and get fabulous Christmas cookies
that cost far less and are decidedly more perfect
than those we make at home,
especially those we make with pint-sized kitchen assistants.

Buying them at the store also means
we don't end up with messy kitchens,
with flour all over everything,
and burnt-on cookie dough to scrape off,
and food coloring staining our fingers,
and mixing bowls stacked up in the sink.

Nevertheless, Christmas cookie-making is in no danger
of disappearing as a holiday activity.
The true appeal is being in the kitchen together,
making laughter and memories to last a lifetime.
The actual cookies produced are almost beside the point.

All of which brings us to this morning's Gospel lesson,
and how God is doing such seemingly impossible things
here in this story about Mary,
and the angel's astonishing announcement.

Why do you suppose God needed Mary?
Oh, yes, sure, she was needed to bear the savior of the world.
But don't you suppose God could have chosen to save the world
all on His own?
Couldn't God have fulfilled all those divine promises
that we read about from the prophets
in any number of ways
that didn't involve asking a teen-age girl to get pregnant
and become mother to God's Son?
After all, nothing is impossible with God.
God could have snapped his fingers
and made everything turn out right.
Made everything perfect.
Just as perfect as a store-bought cookie.

Yet instead, here's this heavenly messenger
having this earth-shaking conversation
with a teen-age girl.
This tells me
that God really wants humanity to be part of the effort,
even if it makes things much more complicated,
much more messy and difficult.
Which it does.

But God isn't willing to do all this behind our backs
or without our own participation.
God wanted Mary in the kitchen with him.

And this is what, in some mysterious way,
makes Mary's story our own.
Because God takes part in the unfolding of each person's life.
God is there with us from before the moment of our conception.
just as God was there before Jesus's conception.
This is a staggering thought,
that we were in God's thoughts
before we ever came to be.

Sometimes, like Mary,
we need time to adjust to such astonishing news.

Time to question whether or not trials and tragedies,
or God's magnificent promises,
are for real,
and to contemplate the potential repercussions.

Mary's question, "How can this be?"
reverberates down through the ages.
Her question reminds us just how much is hidden from us.
The exclamation of those four words,
"How can this be?,"
is surely a sign that God is near.

In hospital waiting rooms,
at the bedside of a dying loved one,
in a hundred different settings of human life
where we are especially aware of "the nearness of God,"
those words express our belief
that God is involved in our lives,
sometimes in ways that are mysterious indeed,
just as God's ways were mysterious to Mary that day,
and every day that followed.

As Advent comes to an end
and Christmas approaches,
we look at our lives and ask,
What is God doing today
that is too wonderful for our imaginations
or our words?
What extraordinary and grace-filled things
have happened in your life?
And what extraordinary and grace-filled things may yet happen?
What is our role in the midst of what God is doing,
and are we willing to say "yes" to that role?

Trusting that all things are possible with God
requires a leap of faith,
not only for Mary, but for us today.
And, like Mary, we will still have questions.
Sometimes we wonder,
If nothing will be impossible with God,

why do our lives seem like such a mess?

And I can only believe that the messes of our lives
are simply confirmation
that God isn't willing to do anything and everything alone.
God wants us in the kitchen too.
In the kitchen, making a mess.
A holy mess.
Those messes can always be cleaned up,
because nothing is impossible with God.

Author Ann Kiemel tried for years to have a child of her own.
After a series of miscarriages,
she developed an infection
that doctors could not cure for a long time.
They put her on pain-killing drugs
and in time she became addicted to them.
It took her years to recover.
But she came out on the far end a different person.
She wrote about her experiences in the book,
I Love the Word Impossible.

In the preface to that book, she writes this:
*I love the word impossible...
it's like joy after sorrow.
People being friends after being enemies.
Rainbows after drenching rain.
A wound healed.
Sunsets on quiet evenings after hot, noisy days.
Paralyzed, injured limbs learning to grow strong and useful again.
Forgiveness after wrong.
Truth after fog...
Bitterness turned to mellowness.
Fresh, genuine hope... once abandoned.
People finding each other at right moments,
In unexpected, obscure places...
For God-ordained reasons.*

On this day before Christmas

what better present could we take away
than Luke's assurance that
nothing will be impossible with God.
And God desires nothing more
than to step into the kitchen of our lives
and seeing what we can whip up together.
Amen.