

The Rev. Ian Burch  
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Remotely preached during COVID-19

The story of the annunciation of Sarah reads like a fable. The Lord God Almighty visits the tent of Abraham, and Sarah makes sure there is some food available for their talk. In the process, she overhears that she, a woman of very advanced years, will bear a child. And she laughs. She can't help it. This thing that God is promising is impossible, and she knows it. I can't imagine that science was very well developed in those days, but they certainly knew that women did not bear children at 91 years old.

And yet that is exactly what God promised—the impossible.

I try really hard not to say things that are not true from the pulpit—or from my office as the case is today. And so I will tell you, I think that St. Mark's might be in for a tough year. Our connective tissue is made up of hugs, and shared burdens, and coffee hour, and music, and praying with one another side by side, helping raise our kids in safety and Godliness, and the welcome of the newcomer. These are the things that, for 127 years, have bound us together in love and the grace of God. And they aren't with us right now. Sure, we have echoes of them in our robust online programming, but something central about us as a parish has gone dormant, and we are unsure when it will wake again.

That's a hard truth to sit with. We have all worked so hard to build a counter-cultural community in the heart of the east side of Milwaukee. And that community feels altered right now, lessened.

Add to that, many of us are concerned about ourselves, our loved ones, our city currently living under a global pandemic. Do you check the news regularly to see how Wisconsin is doing? Do you look at the stock market? Do you wonder if it is safe to go to the store, the office, a restaurant? Even if you're feeling pretty optimistic about how we'll handle all this, it's a stress on the system to be living in an age when going to buy a carton of milk comes with some risk. That kind of ambient stress weighs on us and gives us less energy for friends, for family, for church.

And, of course, every night we see that more and more protesters all over the world, taking to the streets in solidarity with black and brown people who have lived under the dual threats of poverty and violence since they were brought to these shores as the property of a white empire. Something electric is happening in the streets. I saw a Black Lives Matter sign in Waukesha of all places. Waukesha! The dominant culture is waking up to the injustices that people of color

have been talking about for generations. If you look at the protests, you see people of every age, race, religion, and socio-economic stripe out marching. Mitt Romney marched—a conservative Mormon millionaire from Utah. Think about that. Something wild and wonderful is happening in the streets. And yet, it is another upheaval—another reason for stress and a layer of uncertainty in these difficult times.

So, what does this all mean for St. Mark's? What does a pregnant 91 year old woman, a socially distanced church, and a global protest movement all have in common? What is the good news here?

I see no other way to read the Sarah story than this: with God the impossible become possible. From today on, I have decided that God can take a church, socially distanced and meeting remotely from computer screens, and make that church even stronger than it was before. How is that any more ludicrous than a geriatric pregnancy or an empty tomb? My faith tells me that not only will we thrive during this time of exile from our building, but we will actually make an impact on each other and on the world. I have seen such radical kindness in you all in the last weeks—reaching out to the isolated, the sick, the weary, the grieving. I have seen birthday cards and texts of support to one another. I have seen emails and phone calls and socially distanced walks. All this has happened in SPITE of the pandemic, and I believe it is the work of God.

I also believe that God will take what once seemed impossible—a reckoning with white supremacy in our country—and turn it into a more just society, one that sees each human as a child of God and seeks to dismantle the systems that have baked racism into our national pie. And that's going to come with loss in the church. We have hymns that lionize war and violence. We have stained glass that exalts one color of skin and no other. We have a two hundred year old church hierarchy that has centered the ideas of white, straight, men—which means every prayer, every church law, and every custom we have has been influenced if not outright created with one point of view in mind to the exclusion of all others. We have homework to do, church. And yet, I believe that God will work in us for a better future. Even though that seems impossible.

So, my friends in Christ, little Isaac was born to Sarah even though it seemed impossible. Our church will be stronger after a pandemic than before, even though that seems impossible. And our very society will be more just, centering the voices of people of color who have for so long been ignored at best and brutalized at worst. With God none of these things are impossible. So, stay connected, do your homework, and have a little faith. Amen.