AND BEHOLD, YOUR KINSWOMAN ELIZABETH IN HER OLD AGE HAS ALSO CONCEIVED A SON; AND THIS IS THE SIXTH MONTH WITH HER WHO WAS CALLED BARREN. FOR WITH GOD NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE. AND MARY SAID, “BEHOLD, I AM THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD; LET IT BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.”

This morning the Holy Spirit is setting before us a Gospel of impossibilities; impossibilities made possible by the invincible power of God’s love for fallen mankind. Throughout the natural child-bearing years of her life Elizabeth had born the stigma of being barren. But one evening when both she and Zechariah, her husband and a priest, had grown old, he stood before the altar of incense and the Archangel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel had come from God to announce that Elizabeth would conceive a child. Moreover, the child would be the Forerunner of the Messiah. Now Zechariah was a pious man who longed for the day of the Messiah, but Gabriel’s announcement seemed impossible to him. For doubting Gabriel’s word he was struck dumb until the name day of his son. Through the power of divine love the impossible became possible, John was born and as a man faithfully carried out God’s will as the Forerunner of the Messiah.

Six months later the Archangel appeared again, this time to a pious young virgin, named Mary. His message seemed still more impossible. The young virgin, without losing her virginity, would conceive in her womb and bear a Son, who would be the Son of the Most High. Mary was dumbfounded and wondered how it could come to pass because she had no husband. The response of the Archangel revealed a mystery: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” Mary’s confident faith in the word of the Archangel led her to respond without hesitation, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” On a night in Bethlehem the prophetic word came to pass, and the Blessed Virgin gave birth to Jesus, her Son and the Incarnate Son of God. The impossible became possible!

As the song from an old musical puts it, “A hundred million miracles keep...”
happening every day!” Yet no sign or wonder or miracle can compare with the miraculous births of St. John the Baptist the Forerunner and the Lord Jesus Christ, Savior of the world. We are just hours away from Immanuel Church’s celebration of the Nativity of Jesus, our divine Savior and Lord. It is therefore well for us to pause and consider again the significance of these impossibilities that became possible.

Saint Luke declares, “For with God nothing will be impossible.” As we consider the births of John and Jesus we can only conclude that this is especially true of the most gracious actions of our Heavenly Father. It is clear from Sacred Scripture that when it comes to God’s love for fallen mankind nothing can stand in the way of the work of redemption and the restoration of everlasting life. This morning we remember the two women who played important roles in bringing God’s plan of salvation to fruition.

God saw in them what no human being could see! What could an aged, childless woman know about rearing someone of the stature of John the Baptist? What could a teen-aged virgin know about the nurture of an Infant in a strange city without the assistance of family and friends? In their own way both had said “Yes” to God, and God, in turn, gave them the ability and courage to carry out their roles in the drama of redemption. The author of Cry, the Beloved Country wrote with great sympathy, “The lot of woman is to carry, to bear, to watch and to lose.” This was indeed the lot of St. Elizabeth and the Blessed Virgin Mary. They carried their children in their wombs for nine months and gave birth to them. They watched them from infancy to childhood, from puberty to manhood. And then they lost their sons to the vocations given by God to St. John and our Divine Savior.

We do not know how long Elizabeth lived after giving birth, but if she were alive she would have shared with the Blessed Virgin Mary the trauma of losing a son to the world. We know that Mary did not always understand the Messianic role played by her Son, but she never lost faith in Him and His work. Yes, she watched as His ministry progressed and His popularity grew and waned. She wept as she stood with the Apostle John at the cross of Her Son. She was present at His ascension. Tradition indicates that she also was involved in the apostolic ministry of St. John the Evangelist. Her response to the Archangel never changed. God strengthened and led her to carry out the impossible task He had assigned to her.

We can scarcely avoid admiring the courage, faith and strength of St. Elizabeth and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we give thanks to God that He chose them to further His plan for the salvation of the world. But a sermon on the Fourth Sunday in Advent should not end with a paean of praise for two
great and holy women, nor should it end a song of adoration to the living God for the grace revealed in the redemption of the word through our Lord Jesus Christ. Both of these are central to an Advent proclamation! The final Advent sermon must also move each of us to ask, “Have I said “Yes” to the vocation God has given me to further the redemption of the world?”

Each of us has a vocation, a calling from God that gives focus and purpose to our lives and actions. Whatever specific calling God has extended to each of us, we know very well that all we do in life focuses on loving God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. Moreover, as in the cases of the two holy women in the Gospel that love is manifested in the ordinary acts and responsibilities of our every-day lives.

Both the Blessed Virgin Mary and Elizabeth fulfilled their vocations in carrying out their duties as housewives. However, as we can imagine especially life in the Holy Family these duties were acts of love toward the members of the family and acts of praise to God. The lesson for us today is simply this. We fulfill our vocation when we carry out the obligations of our daily life with praise and thanksgiving toward God and love toward our neighbor. When we practice love, praise and thanksgiving in our homes and our businesses the impact will be great. Those with whom we live and work will see the power of the Gospel in daily life.

It has always been so! What was it about the newly converted Christians that opened the eyes and the minds of the citizens of Jerusalem. They may well have heard the Holy Apostles preach and bear witness, but what seemingly had the greatest effect was the actions of Christians toward one another and others. The amazing words in the Book of Acts record the reaction. “See, how they love one another!” When others say this of our lives and actions we can be certain that we are carrying out the obligations of our vocations. If the thought of loving in this way appears impossible, remember that with God nothing is impossible. If you ask, He will give you the power and courage to love unconditionally. By loving you will indeed further God’s plan of salvation. Amen!