

Nothing Will Be Impossible with God

[After song “My soul proclaims with wonder,” and before reading the lesson.]

By way of a heads up, this next part of the today’s worship service is going to be interactive, and at various points I’m going to be asking you for your responses. So if you had any plans on taking a nap now, or on being shy and quiet, you can forget it! ☺

Luke 1:26-38 is one of those passages (and stories) in the Bible that we can practically recite by heart. Instead of simply reading it for you, I thought it would be fun to see how well you know it. I’m going to read parts of it, then periodically ask you to fill in the blanks. But first, put your bulletins away, so you’re not tempted to cheat. And I’ve asked Deryll to hold off on projecting the passage on the front wall. By the way, those of you in our “television audience” should feel free to participate as well. Be sure to shout your answers out loudly, so I can hear you!

[Read the passage, with blanks for the congregation to fill in.]

Okay, you can take out your [bulletins] again. And Deryll, please project this passage for us.

There are so many famous phrases in this passage. Gabriel’s initial greeting to Mary. Mary pondering what sort of greeting this might be. (You’ve probably noticed that Mary does a lot of pondering in the Gospel of Luke.) Gabriel’s enunciation or announcement to her. Mary’s classic response (“How can this be?”). Gabriel’s explanation. But the verse that most caught my attention this past week was verse 37: “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Over and over again, this passage emphasizes the utter impossibility of the Christmas story. For example, why would God send his most important angel to a tiny town in Galilee that was completely unknown at the time? By this time there were lots of towns or cities that had become famous because of the Old Testament. We could mention: Babel, Bethel, Beersheba, Damascus, Gibeon, Harran, Hebron, Jericho, Jerusalem, Megiddo, Midian, Ninevah, Sheba, Sodom and Gomorrah, Shechem, Tyre. But Nazareth isn’t on this list. And in the Gospel of John, 1:46, we have that famous verse where Nathaniel says to Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” implying that if anything, to this point Nazareth had a bad reputation, and was a very unlikely place to be the hometown of the Son of God.

Just for fun, what are some towns in Kansas that would seem to be the least likely place for the angel Gabriel to visit the future mother of Jesus? [Invite responses. Could mention Rock, Potwin] What about towns in the U.S.? [Las Vegas. Gary, IN] And what about countries in the world? [I think of African countries like Uganda or Eritrea] Yet somehow “least likely seems to be one of the themes in the Christmas story.

A second impossibility in this story is that God would send Gabriel to someone as insignificant as Mary was at the time. You would think that God would have chosen someone that was a little more, shall we say, mature, or up to the task, or popular? Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, for example. At least she was mature (maybe a little too mature!). At least she was married. And as we’ll see in just a bit, at least she was the wife of someone important, namely Zechariah, a priest in the temple in Jerusalem.

To help put this in perspective, who, in our world, would seem the least likely (or maybe least qualified) to be the mother of the Son of God? [Invite responses. Some possibilities: a waitress in a small town diner. A high school dropout. A drug addict. A convict in prison.] This is how insignificant we have to assume Mary was.

The most obvious impossibility in the story is the one Mary herself points out in verse 34. It was absolutely impossible that she was (or would soon become) pregnant, since, as she said, “I am a virgin.” Her pregnancy would completely overturn the laws of nature. Everyone knows that you have to have, well, sexual relations to get pregnant. And Mary hadn’t, and wouldn’t. At least for a year.

Of course, what we already know, but Mary didn't yet know (until Gabriel told her), was that her relative Elizabeth had just a few months prior also become impossibly pregnant, in her case, in her "old age." You know the story, which we find just a bit earlier in Luke: an as yet unnamed angel had come to a priest named Zechariah, and told him that his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant. Which Zechariah believed to be completely impossible, because as we are told right at the top, "Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years." Zechariah made the apparent mistake of pointing out this impossibility. Leading the angel, first of all, to introduce himself. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God." As if to say, "I am not just any angel. And you're going to wish you hadn't doubted me." What Gabriel actually said was, "I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." And from that moment, until the eventual birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah was unable to speak.

But Gabriel's "good news" to Mary was different. She wasn't old. She was a virgin. The way Luke tells the story is as if to say, "you think Elizabeth getting pregnant was impossible? You ain't seen nothin' yet." It's as if this time God hadn't just leaned the laws of nature to one side or another (laws which clearly spell out how the world runs) but rather, God completely overturned them.

What are some other laws of nature which we assume to be always and forever true, forever the way the world runs? I'll start. How about this: "the sun always rises in the east." Now it's your turn. [Wait for responses. Can add: "elephants can't fly." "Or how about this one: the world is flat. That's an example of a law of nature that was believed at one time to be completely true, but was completely overturned, this time by science. Now everyone knows that the world is round. Or is it?"]

The angel Gabriel, after dropping on Mary the seemingly impossible news that her older cousin Elizabeth had also "conceived a son," and then reminding Mary that this is the one who "was said to be barren," says to her, "For nothing will be impossible with God." And there's something about the way he said it that dares us to doubt it.

"Nothing will be impossible with God." Notice the future tense, "will be," as if to say it might not be possible now. But the future isn't here yet.

I invite you to think of something which might not be possible yet, but might one day be possible. Some breakthrough or "good news" that we long for. I'll start with an obvious one: that someday there will be a cure for cancer. [Invite other responses. That someday there will be peace on earth.]

Here is another obvious one: that Jesus will come again, and set everything right—that evil will one day be defeated, and good will prevail. That (to quote from Mary later in the chapter, in what we call the Magnificat) "the powerful have been brought down from their thrones, and the lowly lifted up; the hungry have been filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty."

"Nothing will be impossible with God." Do we dare believe this?

There is yet one more amazing verse in this passage. It's what Mary says in the final verse of today's passage. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Do we not think it impossible, amidst this story of impossibilities, that God would send his angel Gabriel to any one of us, that God would call any one of us, that God would want to use any one of us? To give birth to the next Christ child, perhaps? Or even just to be God's chosen, special servant, to be God's ambassador of his good news, his love? Yet is that not what God is already doing? Calling us? Sending us?

And are you ready to say to God, or at least to Gabriel, "Here I am. I'm your servant. I'll go wherever you want me to go. I'll say whatever you want me to say. I'll do whatever you want me to do"?

Our closing song is not in the Advent section or even the Christmas section, but it's one of my favorites. Lois and I chose it to be sung at our ordination many years ago. It's based on a story in the beginning of the book of Isaiah, where the prophet said essentially the same words as Mary, accepting God's call to him.

"Here I am, Lord" (No. 395).