

“Mary’s Impossibilities”
Luke 1:26-38
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2007

“Yes, I see it all now: I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.” Luke 1:38, The Message

It has been reported that many 21st century Americans have problems with the story of Mary. I don’t doubt that. If we are honest with ourselves, it is a pretty hard story to swallow. But if you think that people today have problems with it, think of problems that Mary must have had with it. First of all, she had to contend with what she heard. While still an unmarried virgin, she was told that she would conceive and bear a son. Even though she was young, uneducated, and still quite inexperienced, she had listened to the village women enough to know how babies were made. A son? Impossible! No way! Won’t happen! Second, she had to contend with Joseph, who had kept his promise to refrain from intimacy until he and Mary were wed, and now had to decide whether or not he would follow through with the marriage plans even after discovering that she was pregnant. A wedding? Impossible! No way! Won’t happen! Third, she had to contend with those authorities that were always so quick to judge. The law said those who become pregnant without the benefit of marriage were to be stoned to death. Who was going to believe her explanation? A future? Impossible! No way! Won’t happen! Fourth, if all this happened as she was told, then she would have to contend with a child who will be “Son of the Most High,” who will “sit on the throne of his ancestor David,” and who will rule over a kingdom that will have “no end.” Do you think this young girl, probably no more than 13 or 14 years old, sitting in the house of her commoner father in a village so small it was yet to be on any map, had trouble with all of this? Do you think the verse that states, “But she was much perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be” just might be a bit of an understatement? “How can this be?” Mary asked. As I said, if you have a problem with the sound of what Mary heard, then how do you think it sounded to Mary? Impossible! No way! Won’t happen!

The other day I looked up the word “impossible” in the dictionary. Webster defines it as “incapable of being or of occurring.” In other words, it can’t happen. You

were hoping to get a new car this year, for instance, but your daughter just made the dance team. Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Right? Your boss has piled six more reports on your desk that have to be done by the morning and your wife has called to remind you that your neighbors have invited you over for supper at 7:00 sharp. Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Right? You would really like to get some sleep tonight as you would every night, but despite your pleadings that inconsiderate neighbor of yours continues to put his barking dog outside every night. Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Right? And those are the easy ones. There is that hurt that won't heal, that grief that won't subside, that relationship that needs to be restored. There is that loved one whose life seems to be spinning out of control. Or maybe it's your life that's doing the spinning. A new start? Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Right? There are events in life that, despite our fondest wishes and endless prayers, simply appear to be out of the realm of possibility. Yet two days from now we will celebrate a day that tells us that the impossible is indeed possible. This morning we will proclaim a truth about a story that, on the surface, seems to fit that definition of "incapable of being or of occurring" perfectly. How in the world do we have the audacity to make such a claim? How in the world can we base our faith in a story that seems impossible at best? And how in the world can I stand up here and say that this story with which so many in our world have so many problems can make a real difference in your life and mine?

Well, let's go back to the beginning. We can't answer those questions without knowing the whole story. So let's take a moment and refresh our memories. Six months after Mary's kinswoman Elizabeth found out that she was expecting a child, the angel Gabriel—the one who stands in the presence of God—was sent to the tiny village of Nazareth. Located in the highlands of Galilee, Nazareth was well off the beaten path. It was so unimpressive that the Gospel of John later tells us that it was believed that nothing good could ever come out of it. But it was to Nazareth that Gabriel was sent just the same, and there he found a young woman by the name of Mary, who had been promised in marriage to a man named Joseph. Gabriel said to her, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Now as you know, those words have been a source of contention between Catholics and Protestants for centuries. We could probably spend the

rest of our time together this morning trying to figure out just what those words really mean. And interesting as all that would be, it would not answer our main question. So let's simply say that whatever they may or may not mean, if the Lord favors you, as the Lord favored Mary, then the least you could say is that your life will probably never be the same. As a matter of fact, many of the prophets, Jeremiah in particular, had wished more than once that the Lord had not gone ahead and favored them. Young as she was, Mary recognized that difficulty that came with that favored status. In fact, Luke says that she was so troubled by the angel's words that she wondered what he was going to say next. And that is when she heard the angel say:

*“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.
You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.
He will be great and called the Son of the Most High.
The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David,
and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

Now those are hard words for such a young girl to hear. Those are troublesome words directed to one who probably had received little in the way of formal education. Even for those of us with much education they are words fraught with difficulty. But despite her lack of training, she still knew enough about life to be able to step back and ask that one most important question. “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Once again, we could spend a long time on that one. As he was a physician, you would think that Luke would have taken some time here to address the “how will this be” part of the equation in a bit more detail. Yet it is obvious that the good doctor's main concern was not biology. It was theology. He did take a stab at the “How” question by stating, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,” evoking the Old Testament image of the power of God descending upon the tabernacle in the wilderness by doing so. And yet it is fairly obvious that the way those nine months would begin really were not as important as the way they he knew they would end. That's why Luke chose to emphasize the angel's words, “So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” Then, of course, comes the topper, the line that concerns us this

morning. Gabriel, the one who tradition says is one of the four archangels that surround the throne of God, says: “For with God, nothing will be impossible.”

How can the impossible become possible? Two days before Christmas, that is the question that all of us want answered. And upon the first reading of this story, that answer seems obvious, especially if you are one of those 21st century Americans who *do not* have any trouble with it. In these familiar words, we see that Gabriel proclaims that it is through the power of God that the impossible can become possible. Once again, it is in the proclamation of Gabriel that we hear words that seem to have the ability to get things done: Great, Most High, Lord God, the Throne of David, reign, kingdom, and, of course, no end! The nature and purpose of God are revealed in those words. They remind us that the God who set the world spinning and hung the stars in the sky, the God who called his people out of Egypt and forged them into a nation set apart, the God whose compassion for the people of this planet spills far beyond the borders of tiny Israel, has now set in motion a plan to reconcile the world to himself. The God who created humanity out of the dust of the earth will now be about the task of recreating humanity out of his own self-giving. If that is possible, then anything is possible. If the story of God and God’s people tells us anything it is that nothing is impossible for our amazing God.

But wait. There is more to the story. It doesn’t end there. There is another part that we have yet to consider. And perhaps this is where those 21st century Americans who have so much trouble with this story, maybe even some 21st century Elkhorn Hills United Methodist Christians who have trouble with this story, can not only find a place to plug into it, but also find a way to understand how the seemingly impossible can become possible. The words of a recent poem have stated that part of the story like this:

*On angels wings
eternity-
gifts everlasting-
Do not be afraid,
she said yes.*

In angels eyes,

*praise-
the Messiah comes-
Do not be afraid,
she said yes.*

*On angels lips,
Annunciation-
Holy Spirit within-
Do not be afraid,
she said yes.¹*

In response to the angel's words, words to which it would seem that the only plausible response would be "Impossible! No way! Won't happen!" Mary said, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Or in other less poetic words, Mary said yes. There is an old saying that "it takes two to tango." In case you have forgotten, those words simply mean that there are certain activities in life that cannot be performed alone. Whether it is a good fight, a good marriage, or a good business, it always takes two working together to make it happen. That idea applies to so many situations in our world. Most importantly, that idea also applies here, in this familiar story of Mary. I think that Protestants have sometimes missed the boat when it comes to Mary. In our efforts to distance ourselves from all things Catholic, we have ignored her and her place in the story of salvation. I think that is unfortunate. While there are certain things that our Catholic brothers and sisters believe about the mother of our Lord with which we Protestants legitimately have a lot of difficulty, to dismiss everything taught about her is simply foolish. Luke reminds us that Mary gave herself totally to God. She said yes to the heavenly word. In that respect, she is the model for Christian faith, perhaps even the first true disciple. As someone wrote, "Mary was favored and would bear a king, but only if she gave herself obediently in response to God's call."² Or as another has written, "She did not ask to bear the Son of God, nor was she compelled to do so. She might have said no, or like Zechariah responded to Gabriel's staggering annunciation in disbelief. But she did not shrink from God's call on her life, and instead enriched all humanity by her willing participation and obedient submission."³ In other

¹ From a poem by Jane Rodway

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 9*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1995, p. 53

³ Dan Clendenin, December 12, 2005, www.journeywithjesus.net

words, it was her readiness to be a part of God's plan that enabled the Good News of Christmas to happen. If nothing else, Mary's life and witness proclaims to the whole church that *when God's power is met with a willing and surrendered heart, the impossible becomes possible.*

I hope that you heard that. I hope that you let that part of the Christmas story sink deeply into your soul. When God's power is met with a willing and surrendered heart, the impossible becomes possible. When we say yes, then there is nothing God cannot do. Most of us, however, make the mistake of simply bringing our impossibilities to God and nothing else. We make out a laundry list of what we want to happen then simply lay it at the foot of the throne and wait. In doing so, we only get it half right. In doing so, nothing ever changes. That is because, as Mary and as life teaches us, "It takes two to tango." We are not called to simply bring our impossibilities to God, but to first bring ourselves to God and then bring our impossibilities. God's initiative always calls for our response, you see. So what are the impossibilities in your world? What are the things going on in your life that make you say: "Impossible! No way! Won't happen!" Family problems? Health issues? Spiritual needs? On this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, it is so very important for us to remember that the Christmas story is not just a story of God's gift to us, but also a story of our gift to God. Are you, like young Mary of so long ago, able to respond to God's promise with a willing and surrendered heart? Are you willing to participate with the Holy Spirit as God intervenes into your world of the impossible?

I found a poem written by one of our Catholic brothers that seems to sum it all up quite nicely. While the Protestant in me has some reservations about it, I still think that it can teach us a lot. As you listen, perhaps you could try and put yourself in Mary's shoes, or even better, imagine your own impossible situation and try to understand how this familiar story can make such a big difference in your life and mine. Listen:

*Mary could have said No.
She was promised in marriage to Joseph.
To become pregnant by another would dishonor her betrothed
and risk her life in the community.*

*Mary could have said No,
Herod plotted to kill her child.
Simeon prophesied that her heart would be pierced.
Her young Son was lost for three days in the temple*

*Mary could have said No,
to avoid the sorrow of her Son' humiliation and crucifixion,
the anguish of cradling his broken body in her arms,
and the despair of witnessing her Savior seemingly lost forever.*

*But Mary said Yes.
Be it done unto me
according to your word.*

*Mary said Yes.
For God who is mighty
has done great things for me.*

*Mary said Yes,
and through her faith
salvation came to a world starved for love.*

Dear Mary, Mother most Holy,

*Help me say Yes as you did,
that God may work wonders
through my own faith and life.*

*Help me to say Yes,
that the world may know of your Son
through my words and actions.*

*Help me to say Yes,
that I may proclaim with you
the greatness of the Lord,
and find joy in God, my Savior.⁴*

⁴ From a poem by Ken Canedo