

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE IMPOSSIBLE
Luke 1:5-25

"In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years.

⁸ When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and overcome with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.'

¹⁸ 'How can I know this?' Zechariah asked the angel. 'For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.' ¹⁹ The angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. ²⁰ Now listen! You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.'

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, amazed that he stayed so long in the sanctuary.

²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them. Then they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept making signs to them and remained speechless. ²³ When the days of his ministry were completed, he went back home. ²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived and kept herself in seclusion for five months. She said, ²⁵ 'The Lord has done this for me. He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people.'"

INTRODUCTION

Supervisors in the Lamp Division of General Electric once believed it had been proven impossible to frost light bulbs from the inside. They routinely assigned this task to new engineers as a prank to amuse themselves. Clear (transparent) bulbs, in use since 1880, gave off a harsh light many found annoying or uncomfortable, cast sharp shadows, and even presented hazards by making it difficult to see when close to the light. Many inventors attempted to cut down on this glare by such methods as painting the bulb white, or partially or fully frosting the outside of the bulb. This absorbed too much of the filament's light. Every attempt to frost the inside by various etching acids made the bulb as brittle as an egg shell that easily broke.

Marvin Pipkin (1889-1977) astonished his supervisors by succeeding in this "impossible" task. In 1917, during WWI, Pipkin, with a newly obtained degree in chemistry, went to work for the United States Army developing methods to combat the gas warfare used in the War. He was assigned as a U. S. Govt. scientist to the facilities of General Electric's National Electric Lamp Company (NELA Park) in Cleveland, Ohio. When the War ended, he was hired by NELA Park as a chemical engineer. He hit upon a two-step process that not only frosted bulbs on the inside but coated the interior surface with tiny smooth dimples that strengthened the glass and allowed the bulb to diffuse its light evenly. Pipkin went to his manager's office, Mr. Enfield, to demonstrate them. He held six inside-frosted light bulbs in his hands, three having been treated with just the first application of etching acid, which weakened the glass, and three treated with an additional acid bath he concocted; defying everyone else's assumption a second acid treatment would leave the glass even more brittle. Pipkin stood them all on his manager's desk and tipped them over, one-by-one, to simulate how bulbs are often bumped when handed. The first three shattered easily, scattering

broken glass on Enfield's desk. But the remaining bulbs remained unbroken. He then took the unbroken bulbs and, in a seemingly deranged manner, dropped them straight to the office floor. Enfield gasped, but they did not break, despite bouncing several times. Though broken glass littered his manager's desk, he did not fire Pipkin. Instead, he nominated him for a prestigious award for his "impossible" discovery.

Today's sermon, *An Introduction to the Impossible*, asks if our faith limits us from attempting what we think is impossible, or do we truly have unlimited faith in God to achieve what is humanly impossible?

I. FAITH LIMITED BY WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Luke "carefully investigated everything from the very first" concerning **Jesus Christ**, "so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed," as Luke tells us in **1:1-4**. Luke is careful to ground everything he tells us in solid, historical fact. He places his account of **1:5-22**, "In the days of King Herod of Judea." Herod became "King of Judea," over all the lands possessed by the Jews, in 37 B.C. The announcement of John's birth came near the end of Herod's reign, who died in 4 B.C.

When the action opens in **vs. 5**, God's direct, prophetic voice to the nation of Israel has been silent for 450 years, since the days of Malachi who prophesied in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. **Malachi 3:1-2** records this thrilling promise from God: "'See, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to His temple, the Messenger of the covenant you desire—see, He is coming,' says the LORD of Hosts." But, over time, even God's most vibrant promises may recede until they seem to be an almost unreal memory. His delay in answering our heartfelt prayers may seem like God's denial of our hopes. For centuries, many Israelites doubtless believed their circumstances and their needs dictated God's Messiah should come then! **Galatians 4:4-5** (ESV) reminds us God knows the best time to respond to our prayers; when His grander, eternal purposes can be fulfilled to bless the greatest number with the greatest good, not just our immediate desires: "But when the fulfillment of the time came ["when the right time finally came," GNT] God sent His Son, born through a woman, and born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 63 B.C. Rome's grip upon Israel tightened under the reign of Herod, installed by Roman might as King over Israel in 37 B.C., despite having no Jewish blood in him, as the son of an Edomite father and an Arabian mother. Herod corrupted and controlled the leading priests to advance his own political agenda, even forcing pagan culture of the Greeks and Romans upon Israel in many ways. It became popular under Herod for Jews, especially their leaders, seeking popularity, power, or prosperity under the Romans, to pay lip service to Israel's faith in God while abandoning true worship of the LORD.

Zechariah and Elizabeth stand in sharp contrast to the many self-serving religious leaders of their day, "scribes and Pharisees" whom Jesus denounced as "hypocrites"; for they were, "like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every impurity" (**Matthew 23:27**). This couple, both of priestly descent, represented the many Jews who, though ordinary citizens, exemplified true devotion to Israel's God. **Vs. 6**: "Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord." This does not mean they were sinless. This does mean their compliance with God's merciful stipulations for the forgiveness of their sins and their efforts to be obedient to God's moral standards were not for show but from their hearts.

It's easy to admire Zechariah and Elizabeth. Despite the growing unpopularity of people of such pure worship of the LORD even within Israel, they refused to compromise God's standards. **Vs. 7** adds, "[T]hey had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years." Despite the "disgrace" this caused Elizabeth (**vs. 25**) in a society that saw childlessness as a sign of God's disfavor, and the risk this exposed them to of poverty or neglect in their old age, they remained true to the LORD.

We are given a front row seat for the biggest day in the life of Zechariah, whose name means, "God remembers." There were 18,000-20,000 active priests at that time, descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother. They were organized into 24 divisions, of which Abijah's was the eighth (**I Chronicles 24:1-19**). Each division served twice a year, for one week, at the Temple in Jerusalem. With 750-800 priests in service on any given day, there were not enough sacred duties for all, so lots were cast to assign them. God prescribed a daily offering of "year-old lambs," morning and evening, to symbolize the Israelites were God's special possession, to celebrate their direct access to His holy presence, and to reaffirm their sacrificial devotion to the LORD (**Exodus 29:38-46**). God also required incense to be offered with priestly prayers accompanying this twice-daily offering (**Exodus 30:1-8**). The altar of incense was positioned within the Temple's first inner chamber, the Holy Place; just outside the veil before the Holy of Holies, where none but the High Priest could go, once each year, on the Day of Atonement (**Leviticus 16**). This is the closest to God's Presence any regular priest could get, so Jewish law stipulated a priest could receive the honor of taking incense into the Holy Place just once in a lifetime; many never received this exalted privilege. On this day, Zechariah has double evidence "God remembers" him: God had directed the lot to fall to him to offer incense and he would stand as close as possible to God's immediate presence for anyone not the High Priest.

Zechariah went first to the altar of burnt-offering, filled a golden censer with incense, and then placed burning coals from the altar in a golden bowl. God prescribed the formulation of this sacred "incense" in **Exodus 30:34-38**. Upon entering the Holy Place, Zechariah then arranged the coals on the incense altar before spreading the incense over the coals. Its ascending, perfumed smoke symbolized the hopes of God's people that their prayers would be welcomed with favor in God's presence (**Psalms 141:2; Revelation 8:3**). This is why, "At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside" (**vs. 10**).

Suddenly, "An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and overcome with fear.¹³ But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.¹⁴ There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth.¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb.¹⁶ He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.¹⁷ And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.'¹⁸ 'How can I know this?' Zechariah asked the angel. 'For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years'" (**vss. 11-18**).

Zechariah's answer is quite revealing. First, he most likely no longer believed God could grant him and Elizabeth a child, "For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years." A priest offering incense before the Holy of Holies in behalf of the nation of Israel would not have used this "once-in-a-lifetime" occasion to present a purely personal prayer. Secondly, as a god-honoring priest, Zechariah would have recognized this angel's declaration cited God's promises in **Malachi 4:5-6**: "'Look, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome Day of the LORD comes.⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.'" This prophecy made Elijah's return commonly expected in Jewish circles as the prelude to God's coming judgment. Every devout Jew lived in expectation of its fulfillment, for this would herald the Messiah coming to initiate the Day of Israel's Salvation and Deliverance from all enemies. Clearly, Zechariah had fallen into the trap of allowing his faith to be limited by what he believed to be possible. After he overcame being "startled and overcome with fear," he had the faithless audacity to tell this dazzling supernatural being, with "a face like the brilliance of lightning" and "eyes like flaming torches" (according to Gabriel's description in **Daniel 10:6**), "what you are telling me is impossible." His limited faith did not allow him to believe God could graciously combine his previous prayers for a son with Israel's prayers for the one who would go before the Messiah "in the spirit and power of Elijah." Becoming "silent and unable to speak" became the sign he insisted upon before he could believe what God told him.

Zacharias In Advent, a poem by Francisco R. Albano, captures the drama and dilemma of Gabriel's announcement to this godly priest: Imagine this man, / A priest, no less, / Not believing an angel! No life comes from / Barrenness, he told himself. / Imagine this man, / Of a temple of holiness / Imprisoned in his scientific / Rational mind, / Dumbfounded by old / Elizabeth's grace-filled tummy, / facing sweet Mystery / Of Life flowing from / Impossibility

II. UNLIMITED FAITH IN THE IMPOSSIBLE

Are we any different than Zechariah? We would do well to be as faithfully devoted to God's worship and service, as were Zechariah and Elizabeth. But do we have Unlimited Faith in the Impossible, or is our Faith Limited, as was Zechariah's, by What Is Possible? Before we rush to answer, let's measure our faith by the context of this passage. Zechariah may have been quick to profess his unlimited faith in God doing the impossible if he'd not been told God wanted to accomplish the impossible through *him and his wife*.

Would you believe this story? A local business put this sign in its window: "HELP WANTED. Must be able to type, must be good with a computer and must be bilingual. We are an Equal Opportunity Employer. A short time later, a dog trotted into the office manager's office, jumped up on the chair and stared at him. The office manager looked at the determined dog; surprised, but he finally got the idea. He told the dog, "I can't hire you. The sign says you have to be able to type." The dog jumped down, went to the typewriter, and proceeded to type out a perfect letter. He took out the page, trotted over to the manger with it in his teeth, gave it to him, and then jumped back on the chair. The manager was stunned! Then he told the dog, "The sign says you have to be good with a computer." The dog flawlessly executed a difficult worksheet on the computer. By this time the manager was totally dumbfounded! He looked at the dog and said, "I realize you are a very intelligent dog and have great job skills. But I still can't give a dog a job." The dog jumped down and went to a copy of the sign, put his paw on the sentence, "Equal Opportunity Employer," and gave him a hopeful look. The manager said, "Yes, but the sign also says that you have to be bilingual." The dog hesitated, and then opened its mouth and said, "Meow."

You're probably thinking, this story is impossible, something you know could never happen. Isn't that what Zechariah did? Would you believe it if Gabriel stunningly appeared in our church to announce God wanted to demonstrate His power to our skeptical nation by bestowing supernatural abilities on your pet, or some animal special to you, and you were to be the one God chose to train this miraculous animal? From Zechariah's viewpoint, Gabriel's announcement to him seemed to be nearly as impossible. Was he right?

CONCLUSION

Eugene L. Clark (1925-82) lived out the theme of his most famous song, *Nothing Is Impossible*. He performed marvelously on both piano and organ until crippling arthritis robbed him of use of his hands. Then, in 1963, at age 38, he became totally blind. He found it impossible to continue playing keyboards. His heart for **Jesus** then inspired him to attempt the seemingly impossible. Using a dictating machine at his bedside, he composed three cantatas and nearly 200 gospel songs and hymns; a note, a rest, a bar, and a dot at a time. Clark credited the love, loyalty, and patience of his wife for his ongoing musical success. He composed his best-known song, *Nothing Is Impossible*, in 1964, soon after becoming an invalid. We sang the chorus. These are the verses: (1) I read in the Bible the promise of God, that nothing for Him is too hard; Impossible things He has promised to do, If we faithfully trust in His word. (2) The word of the Lord is an anchor secure, When winds of uncertainty blow; Though man in his weakness may falter and fail, His word will not fail us we know. (3) "All things are possible," this is His word, Receive it 'tis written for you; Believe in His promises, God cannot fail, For what He has said He will do. (Chorus) Nothing is impossible when you put your trust in God; Nothing is impossible when you're trusting in His Word. Harken to the voice of God to thee: "Is there anything too hard for Me?" Then put your trust in God alone and rest upon His Word—For everything, O everything, Yes, everything is possible with God!