

FURTHER INTRODUCTION TO THE IMPOSSIBLE

Luke 1:26-38

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of his father David, ³³ and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵ And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸ And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her."

INTRODUCTION

Last week's sermon asked if our faith limits us from attempting what we think is impossible or if we have unlimited faith in God to achieve what is humanly impossible, even through us? Many things are humanly impossible to do. It's impossible to slam a revolving door. It's also impossible to keep your leg moving in a clockwise circle and simultaneously draw the number "6." Now that you've heard this, it will be impossible for many of you not to try doing this as soon as you get the chance! How about flying unaided like a bird? Is this humanly impossible? Philip, one of the Church's first deacons, did just that. **Acts 8** tells his story. After intense persecution drove him and many believers from Jerusalem, Philip became God's instrument to ignite thousands of Samaritans in turning spectacularly to saving faith in **Jesus Christ**. Surprisingly, at the height of his ministry, God directed Philip to leave Samaria for a desert roadway, where he encountered "a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians," who came to saving faith in "Jesus." **Acts 8:38-40** (NASB) describes what happened next: "And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus [Ashdod] and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea."

Do we miss opportunities God gives us of experiencing His miraculous power because we claim God asks the impossible of us? A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) observed, "God is looking for people through whom He can do the impossible. What a pity that we plan only the things we can do by ourselves."

I. FAITH LIMITED BY WHAT IS POSSIBLE

We will contrast the limited faith of Zechariah, the focus of last week's message, with the unlimited faith in the impossible of Mary. To do this, we must review **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.'"

Our faith, what we truly believe in without a doubt, can be tested in many ways. A defendant was on trial for murder. Strong evidence indicated his guilt but no corpse had been found. The Defense attorney, knowing his client probably faced conviction, resorted to a trick in his closing statement. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you," the lawyer said, looking at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom!" He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked eagerly. A minute passed; nothing happened. Finally, the lawyer spoke. "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But all of you looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist you return a verdict of not guilty." With that, the jury retired to deliberate. After only a few minutes, they came back and pronounced a verdict of guilty. "But how?" the lawyer asked. "You must have had some doubt. I saw all of you stare at the door." "Oh, yes," said the jury foreman, "we all looked, but your client didn't!"

A comparison of Zechariah and Mary, and their faith, reveals many similarities and striking contrasts:

1) Both are devout Jews and share expectations of a coming Messiah.

2) It's not humanly possible for both women involved to be candidates for motherhood; Elizabeth due to being post menopause and Mary due to her virginity.

3) Both messages from God are announced by Gabriel, whose name means, "strong one of God." If we combine his name with his privileged status, one "who stands in the presence of God" (**vs. 19**), Gabriel could be described as "God's champion warrior." Knowing the struggles they might experience in accepting the stunning, nearly unbelievable messages God gives them, He sends His most convincing messenger, second in command only to "Michael the archangel" (**Jude 9**), to deliver this startling news.

4) Zechariah's encounter with the angel takes place at the center of the Jewish world, in Israel's capital of Jerusalem and at Israel's holiest site, the Temple. Mary's encounter with the angel comes where it is least expected, Nazareth, an insignificant village of about 500 residents, of which the prevailing opinion was expressed by Nathanael in **John 1:46**: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

5) Zechariah holds an honored position as a priest, a descendant of Aaron. He's trained in God's laws and is privileged with direct access to the Scriptures. **Vs. 6** reveals he and Elizabeth took their faith seriously and sought to live pleasing in all ways to the Lord: "Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord." Being at least 60 years old at the time of this event of **Luke 1**, he benefits from a lifetime of walking with God. Mary is descended from King David, but lives simply as a peasant. She is probably no older than 15, with few years to walk with God. She lacks direct access to Scripture and has no formal training in its teachings.

6) Elizabeth's pregnancy fulfills their decades-long prayer for a child more wonderfully than they ever dreamed possible and would end her "disgrace" (**vs. 25**). Zechariah has immediate reasons to rejoice over what the angel tells him. The angel promises Mary what she'd never sought or prayed for; exposing her to great disgrace as an apparently unwed mother. Joseph could divorce her. Her family or religious leaders could banish her or even seek her death for adultery. Zechariah had nearly everything to gain and nothing to lose to embrace what God tells him is His will. Mary had much to lose by embracing God's will.

7) Zechariah had more reasons to receive God's words with obedient faith than Mary. He'd fallen into the trap of faith in what God could achieve through him being limited to what was humanly possible. He overcame being "startled and overcome with fear" (vs. 12) and told this dazzling angel with "a face like the brilliance of lightning" (as Gabriel is described in **Daniel 10:6**), "what you are telling me is impossible." Limited faith did not allow him to believe God could combine his previous prayers for a son with Israel's prayers for one who would go before the Messiah "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (vs. 17). Becoming "silent and unable to speak" became the sign he insisted upon before he could believe what God told him.

This Biblically trained, devout, and mature priest receives a special commission from God Almighty to bless him, Israel, and the world for time and eternity. Zechariah immediately whips out a "that's impossible" measuring rod. Similar skepticism seeks to roadblock most innovations from becoming reality. Charles F. Kettering (1876-1958), an American engineer, was Director of Research for General Motors Corporation for 27 years. The most notable of his 140 patents is his key-operated, electric self-starter for automobiles. Introduced in 1912, this made automobiles far easier and safer to operate than the ignition process powered by iron hand cranks. His passion for invention spread far beyond the automotive industry. He helped develop the refrigerant Freon used in refrigerators and air conditioners, and invented an incubator for premature infants. Charles "Boss" Kettering, as he was known, revealed his chief obstacle in developing new solutions or revolutionary approaches: naysayers who insisted his ideas were impossible. He wrote, "When I was research head of General Motors and wanted a problem solved, I'd place a table outside the meeting room with a sign: Leave slide rules here. If I didn't do that, I'd find someone reaching for his slide rule. Then he'd be on his feet saying, 'Boss, you can't do it.'"

II. UNLIMITED FAITH IN THE IMPOSSIBLE

In essence, Zechariah told God, "Boss, You can't do it through me." Mary's reply is, "Boss, you can do whatever You want, even through me." Her faith and obedience are stunning in comparison to Zechariah!

Vs. 26-27: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary." Mary may have been 15 but probably closer to 13; the normal age of betrothal after puberty. Fewer adults lived into their 50s than today. In the 1st century, marriage consummation did not occur until 12 months after the betrothal details agreed to by the groom and bride's father. The bride would remain in her father's home. This gave the groom time to acquire the dowry to be paid to the bride's family for loss of a worker within her family. Betrothals were so binding they could only be broken by death or divorce.

Vs. 28: "And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!'" Martin Luther suggests, "Quite possibly Mary was doing the housework when the Angel Gabriel came to her. Angels prefer to come to people as they are fulfilling their calling and discharging their office. The angel appeared to the shepherds as they were watching their flocks, to Gideon as he was threshing the grain, to Samson's mother as she sat in the field."

Vs. 29: "But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be." "Greatly troubled" translates an intensive form of the Greek word translated "startled" in **vs. 12**: "When Zechariah saw him, he was startled." The Greek word most literally describes how unsettled our thoughts or emotions become when we are shocked by a totally unexpected crisis. "Discern" could also be translated, "deliberate." The Greek word means, "to consider different options and decide on the best explanation." Mary sought to understand this angel's appearance and greetings in the way to best settle her thoughts and align her with what she knew of God. She never doubted nor sought to escape God's will.

Vs. 31: "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus." "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua," which means, "the LORD [YAHWEH] is salvation." **Matthew 1:18-25** (NASB) records how an angel gave Joseph assurance to complete his marriage to Mary after she "was found to be with child" not his own. The angel told Joseph in **vs. 21**, "'She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'"

Vs. 32: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of his father David." The Greek word translated "Most High" is an emphatic way to declare **Jesus** is the Son of God who transcends, creates, and exists beyond all else.

Vs. 33: "and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." **Jesus** is "the Christ," the Messiah foretold throughout Jewish Scripture. There is no other Savior. **Romans 10:12-13** (NIV): "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"

Vs. 34: "And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'"—literally, "since I know no man" in a sexual way. Unlike Zechariah, Mary receives no rebuke from Gabriel for unbelief. She does not question *if* this could happen but *how* what the angel tells her could happen. **Vs. 35:** "And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.'" The angel affirms Mary's virginity. He then declares God's "Spirit" will "overshadow" human limitations to conceive her "holy" child by God's supernatural "power"; eliminating need of a natural father. Years ago, a 10-year old girl tutored by her grandmother thought she'd become quite knowledgeable of the Bible. But one day, she floored her grandmother by asking, "Which Virgin was the mother of Jesus ? The Virgin Mary or the King James Virgin?"

The Virgin Birth of **Jesus** is without parallel in pagan mythology. It's a bedrock doctrine of our Christian faith. Without it, **Jesus** would be merely another man; inspired, but sinful, mortal, dead, and damned! And so would all of us be! The life of our Lord is marked by the virgin's womb, and the empty tomb. He came into the world through a door marked "No Entrance" and left through one marked "No Exit!"

Vs. 36: "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren." Mary is rewarded for her readiness to believe and cooperate with what the angel tells her, regardless of how incredible it seemed. She is given a sign to strengthen her resolve to face whatever trials her obedience to God's will would demand of her.

Vs. 37: "For nothing will be impossible with God." "Impossible" in Greek means, "beyond the power or ability." Gabriel's words draw out a persistent theme of these opening chapters of **Luke**: God's promises may be relied upon even when they blow holes in natural human expectations!

Vs. 38: "And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.'" "Servant" is the feminine form of the Greek word "doulos": "one who gives oneself up to another's will." "Handmaiden" (KJV) or "maidservant" (NKJV) are appropriate translations, for a maidservant is devoted to pleasing her Master. Mary embraces not only the "impossibility" of what the angel has promised but also the real possibilities of the personal cost of her undertaking to fulfill God's purposes. Someone has written, "Doubt sees the obstacles; Faith sees the way. Doubt sees the darkest night; Faith sees the day. Doubt dreads to take a step; Faith soars on high. Doubt questions, 'Who believes?' Faith answers, 'I!'"

CONCLUSION

A teenage girl from a solid, loving family was lured into drugs through her friends at school. Despite the efforts of her parents and professional help, she kept going back to drugs. She left home, dropping out of sight for awhile; then showed up again at Christmas, more depressed and confused than ever. One night, her mother went to the daughter's room to tell her again how much she loved her. Mom also said she was praying for a miracle that would save her. The girl soon left the house but returned about midnight. The next morning, the mother woke up to find her daughter making breakfast. She had a smile on her face, and looked like a new person. Mom couldn't believe her eyes. Her daughter told her of the long, desperate walk she took that night. She came back ready to take her own life; believing she'd failed her parents, her God, and herself. She sat in her room figuring out the best way to do it. But as she sat there, she found herself looking at a Christmas card someone had sent to her. Her Mom had left it on her bedside table. The daughter opened the card and saw a painting of Mary responding to the news of the miraculous baby who would be named **Jesus**. This young woman held the card to her chest and began to cry out to God for help. She said she heard a voice saying to her, "Why didn't you ask Me for help long before this? I've been here all the time." She knew it was the Lord's voice. She spent the rest of the night walking the floor while she talked to God and held on to that Christmas card with the picture of Mary saying "yes" to God. All at once a peace and a release came over her. Her life had turned a corner. She began a process of change that continued to grow as a faithful follower of **Jesus** who believes, "Nothing will be impossible with God."