

Letting the Impossible Happen to Us

Luke 1:26-38

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Mary could have said no. She says to the angel, “Let it happen to me according to your word.” So she could have said, “Do not let it happen. No...I will *not* let it happen.” When novelist Frederick Beuchner [*Peculiar Treasures*] imagined this scene, he noted the irony of Gabriel telling Mary not to be afraid. “As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation now hung on the answer of a girl.” God was not going to force himself on her, any more than God will force himself on you if you don’t want Christ to live in you. C. S. Lewis wrote that God woos us but he is always a gentleman. Mary could have said no to God, as people often do.

If Mary had said no, would there have been a Messiah? Yes,, God would have accomplished his purpose somehow. But Mary would have missed out on being part of what God was doing in the world. Can you imagine how Mary would have felt years later if the Messiah had been born to another girl, if she had seen the Son of God walking by but he was just a stranger to her, if she had been left out of the story? She would have thought, “I could have walked with him and talked with him and told him he was my own—but I said no to God when he wanted to change my life.”

Why would Mary have said no?

She could have said no because she felt unworthy. Who *would* feel worthy to give birth to the Son of God? When people encounter God—or a messenger from God like Gabriel—they usually have two responses: (1) they are afraid, and (2) they feel unclean or sinful in the presence of a holy God. But listen to what the angel says: (1) Don’t be afraid. (2) You have found favor with God. That is, God loves you.

The angel does *not* say in the Greek, “Hail Mary, full of grace.” He says, “Greetings, favored one—you who have *received* God’s grace.” The point is not that Mary is special and righteous. Luke tells us all about the religious life of her relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth, saying *they* are righteous and upright, but he does not tell us that about Mary. There is no hint that God chooses Mary because she is sinless. It’s all grace. God chooses because he chooses. Mary is, as far as we can tell, a teenager living in an isolated place like Block Island, in a working class family. And God says to her, “You! I want you to be part of my great purpose in this world.”

This is what God says to you this morning. God sent me as his messenger like Gabriel to say, “Don’t be afraid. God loves you. God wants you to be a part of his purpose of saving the world.” And your first thought—like Mary, like Moses or Isaiah or Jeremiah in the Old Testament when God called them—is “Surely not me. You must have the wrong person. I’m not good enough.” But God’s message is always, “It’s not about *you* being good enough. It’s about *me* being good enough.” As Jesus said to his followers, “You haven’t chosen me; I have chosen you.” The decision as to whether I can love you is out of your hands. I have *chosen* to love you. The decision as to whether I can *use* you is out of your hands. I have chosen to use you to help me save the world. That is the message to you this morning: You don’t have to be afraid of God, because God loves you. But his love comes with a calling into a relationship with him, and that relationship involves becoming part of his plan, part of his revolution. Are you good enough for

God to use. No way. Of course you feel that you are not up to it. But God has a mission for you anyway.

But Mary could also have said no because it seemed *impossible* that God could do what the angel says. “How can this be” she asks, “since I am a virgin?” And we are still left with that question: How *could* Mary have a baby if she was really a virgin? And, for that matter, how could the infinite God who made the whole universe make himself small and fit into the uterus of a teenage girl in Galilee? These things seem impossible to us, but Jesus said when he grew up, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Gabriel says to Mary, “If you have trouble believing in the impossible, look at your relative Elizabeth, the wife of the priest Zechariah. She is getting on in years. Everybody said that it was impossible for her ever to have a baby. But she is in her sixth month.” Look, Mary, God is in the business of doing the impossible. And here’s the principle to remember from scripture: “No word from God will ever fail.” A literal translation of that sentence in Greek would be “It will not be impossible with God every word.” In other words, everything that God says is also possible. It was God’s word that called our reality into being. God spoke, and the world happened. God saying it made it happen. So if God tells us that he will do something, who are we to say it is impossible?

Advent is a season of hope. We all have hopes and dreams of some kind. Most of us, by the time we reach a certain age, have seen our hopes and dreams bump up against the stone wall of reality. I always wanted to be... I always hoped I would... and then there is the great “but.” But it didn’t happen because things were more difficult than I first thought. Because, as Ronald Reagan said, “Facts are stubborn things.” So perhaps you have decided to settle for what is. You have decided that this is the only possible world, your only possible life. Anything better is impossible. We have gotten so used to reality that we are hope-less.

Augustine said, “Hope has two sisters, anger and courage—anger at the way things are and the courage to change them.” When Mary accepts the angel’s message and sings the Magnificat, we see her anger and her courage as she praises a God who helps the poor and brings down the powerful. But the anger and courage would be useless without hope, hope in God who is *able* to change the world. There are too many people in our society—and in our churches—who are full of anger at the way things are and may even be full of courage, but who lack *hope*, who lack the confidence that God can do what he said.

But the word that comes to us from God this morning is that if God has made a promise he will keep it. If God said he would change you, he will do it. If God said he would give you abundant, overflowing life, he will do it. If God promised to bring a kingdom of peace on this planet, he will do it.

I love what Jeremiah prayed in the midst of the long siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, when the ramp was built up against the walls. On God’s orders, Jeremiah went and bought a field outside the city as an investment, as a sign that he believed that his country would come back from the dead. After he bought the land, Jeremiah began his prayer (32:17), “Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and your outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” Nothing, nothing, nothing is too hard for God.

And that is what Mary concludes when Gabriel tells her that although it may seem impossible for her to have a baby when she is a virgin, although it may seem impossible for her to bear the Son of God in her own womb, no word from God is ever impossible. So Mary says, “Let it happen to me according to your word.” Yes, Lord. Let the impossible happen to me.

There is something impossible that God wants to do in your life. You know what it is. You may think it is impossible for God to save you. You may think it is impossible for God to change your life. You may think it is impossible for God to use you as his instrument and make a difference in the world. But God's word to you is, "You are highly favored. Do not be afraid. God can do this. No word from God will ever fail." And your response to God must be, "Let the impossible happen to me."

There are impossible things that God wants to do in our *church*. God doesn't want Harbor Church to go on with business as usual, even though we are a very nice group of people. God wants to bring new life into our church as we share in his work. He wants to bring people into our family who would never think of themselves as "church people." God wants to change individual lives with a kind of transformation that cannot be explained in terms of human causes alone. God wants to see more and more of the children on the island touched by the love of Jesus. God wants to see a youth group reborn and teenagers who serve as models to the rest of us of what it means to live by kingdom values. God wants our building to be used—all of it—and he is perfectly able to provide the money to make that happen.

You might say that our hopes bump up against reality—financial reality, demographic reality, the reality of aging. But remember: God has *already* done lots of things in this church that are impossible. Our building burned down, and yet here we sit—because of an unexpected gift. If somebody told you a year ago that Harbor Church was expecting to get an Ivy League-educated minister who liked to get down and play with kids, a man living in the Midwest who was in love with the sea, a minister with 30 years of experience with large staffs who would be happy as a solo pastor, a homeowner who would live in a parsonage, a poet married to an artist who can also sing and lead hand bells, an evangelical who is also progressive—you would have said that was *impossible*, right? But you know what happened. From my side of the equation, it's a miracle that Becca and I wound up on Block Island. A year ago, I would have said it was impossible that I would be in this beautiful place in this wonderful community. But the impossible happened. Remember what Gabriel said: "Nothing that God says is impossible." So our response as a church should be like Mary's—"Let the impossible happen to us."

There is an element in Mary's story that goes beyond believing. Mary had to make a decision to go along with God's plan for her. She could have believed everything the angel told her and *still* said no because she wanted to lead her own life. She could have said, "I believe God could make a baby in me, but this is my body. Leave it alone." She could have said, "This is my one and only life and I have plans for it that don't include being your servant."

Maybe that's where you are this morning. You don't have trouble believing the whole Christmas story, but if God says to you, "I want *you* to be my servant" you are ready to say, "I don't think so. Actually, God, I want you to be *my* servant." Whenever we meet God there is a clash of wills. It is unlikely that God wants your life exactly as it is, and that his plan for you just happens to be what you've always wanted. God has something for you to do—no matter how old you are—that will disrupt your plans. And the choice we face when the word of God comes to us is not always between good and evil, or faith and disbelief; it may be a choice between my plans and God's.

What Mary says is, "I am your servant." She means "God, you are my master, and I am ready to do what you want. If you want something that seems impossible to me, go ahead. Let what you want happen in my life. Let the impossible happen to me."