

Something strange, disturbing, monumental, and overwhelming happened to Mary. Unlike all the other women in the Bible for whom the announcement of a child is incredibly good news, Mary has not been waiting for years to have a baby. She’s not even ready to have a baby! She’s still very young, having reached the maturity to bear children probably in the last year or so. Besides that, she’s not married yet—like most girls of that era, her marriage had been pre-arranged by her parents some time ago, so there was no question that she would be wed one day. But it hadn’t happened yet.

So, Gabriel’s announcement of an impending pregnancy was not the answer to Mary’s prayers. This is not Hannah or Sarah or Rachel who have long lived with the bitter disappointment of infertility. Far from it! In fact, Gabriel’s words do not as much *solve* a problem for Mary as they *create* a problem. This simply was not the right time for Mary to have a baby. At least, so she thought.

But this is at least partly the whole point of the story. It’s not about Mary’s timing or plans but is simply and entirely about God’s timing, God’s plans, and God’s work. God is intervening in this world, rearranging schedules and realigning lives because that’s what it will take to get God’s miraculous work of redemption accomplished.

But in the wider biblical context, the things that make this scene different from many other similar scenes ought to give us pause. Suppose we ran across a scene from a western while surfing through the TV channels one evening. But then suppose that, just before we clicked the remote for the next channel, we noticed that one of the two cowboys was dressed in pink and was not reaching for a gun but a live sunflower he had tucked into his belt. My guess is that this would be enough to make us stop our channel-surfing long enough to see what in the world was going on here! There must be a reason behind this change in an otherwise predictable set of cinematic circumstances.

Similarly, in Luke 1 an angel visits someone to talk about having a baby. We’ve seen this before. But wait, she’s a virgin. She hasn’t had a child yet, but

accomplishing that hardly requires a miracle. Further, she's not like Sarah who was in her 80s or even her cousin Elizabeth who also appears to have been close to retirement age. Mary has just entered puberty. Clearly, these changes in a traditional type of scene signal that something out of the ordinary is taking place so Mary reasonably asks Gabriel, "*How will this be since I am a virgin?*" An equally relevant question to ask might be, "*Why is this happening to me?*" Since Mary does not seem like a logical candidate for divine intervention on the fertility front, nor does she seem a likely candidate to be a big player in the drama of cosmic redemption, "*Why?*" sounds like a fairly reasonable question.

The angel says to Mary, "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" Then Mary says, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" Nothing is impossible for God. With God, all things are possible. There is nothing that God cannot do! There are limitless possibilities for those willing to put their faith and trust in God. It's true for this congregation and for each one of us in our lives through personal faith in the living God.

Impossibilities can happen. Take the case of the Reverend Robert Schuller. He graduated from Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan and went to California to start a church. It was during the 1950s when so many people from the Midwest went to California. Schuller loaded his books in his station wagon with his wife and small children and drove around until he found a place to start a congregation. It was an unconventional spot—a drive-in movie theatre. Schuller began preaching on Sunday mornings from a portable pulpit erected in the parking lot and his congregation came in casual clothes and sat in their cars picking up the sermon over the portable speakers provided by the theatre.

On a very limited budget he resolved to do two things without fail: He would provide professionally printed bulletins—typeset bulletins—no matter what the expense and he would have music provided by a pipe organ no matter how small the organ. He would also hire professional musicians for the service. Robert Schuller built his parking lot church and later erected a church building to go with it.

The conventional wisdom of church leaders continued to say he built in the worst possible place for a church since it was surrounded by freeways and almost in the shadow of Disneyland. What seemed impossible, God made possible for Dr. Robert Schuller. He later wrote a book describing his personal theology as “Possibility Thinking.” In 1977 Schuller again stepped out in faith when he decided his church building was too small, so he designed a new 18-million-dollar sanctuary made of glass. Only the finest materials, the finest design, went into the building. He added the largest pipe organ. His Board of Trustees resigned—every last one of them—because they said it was impossible to fund such a large project. They lacked vision. They had little faith for not only was the Crystal Cathedral built, but it was entirely paid for by the time it was dedicated. God turned what was seemingly impossible into an unlimited possibility for Robert Schuller.

God makes all things possible. God can come into this congregation and use the resources we have been given to build up the body of Christ. We do not need to focus on scarcity but abundance; not see the glass as half-empty but half-full. We can concentrate on what we *can* do rather than what we *cannot* do. I received an e-mail of encouragement from a friend a few years back which said, among other things, “Look to Jesus.” That friend reminded me of the optical illusion where if we step back and look correctly at a black and white ink drawing, we can see the face of Christ rather than just ink blots. I was reminded of the time when Peter was walking on water heading to Jesus and then lost focus and started to sink. When he looked to Jesus, when he focused on Jesus, Peter was able to stay above the waves. What good advice for all of us in our times of trouble and discouragement, to look to Jesus and not ourselves, to concentrate on the Lord rather than our problems!

Our Scripture this morning is the story of two visitations: Gabriel visits Mary in Nazareth and Mary visits her kinswoman Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea. Elizabeth’s unborn child, John the Baptist, leaps for joy in his mother’s womb because the Savior was coming into the world. Mary is called “blessed” because she believes the Lord’s promise from Gabriel. Likewise, we are called

to be optimists not because of wishful thinking but based on God's sure promises. God can make all things possible for us and our response needs to be the same as Mary's—pure, simple faith. Think of the Christmas story. Who would have thought that this country girl of fourteen or fifteen would be the mother of the Savior? Who would have imagined that the Son of God would be born in a stable and laid in a cattle trough or that Magi would come from afar bearing expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh? A much greater impossibility was that “a virgin” would conceive and bear a child. This contradicts all laws of nature, but God set up those laws and God is able to use them as he wills. Once in all human history, the law of God was broken by God, so that God's Son might come into the world.

We need faith. Science can in no way *disprove* the miracle of Jesus' conception and birth. The only disproof science can offer is based upon *probability*. If there have been billions and billions of children born and none of them was conceived by virgins, then science can tell us that it's most *improbable* that the Virgin Mary conceived Jesus. What it cannot tell us is that the virgin birth of Jesus *did not* occur. The Bible is a reliable witness of God and the Bible tells us that Jesus was conceived *by a virgin*. The God who made this world broke into the world in a totally new way in the birth of his Son, our Savior.

The Christian Church bears witness to the uniqueness of this Child by confessing clearly that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man. Son of the Father from all eternity and son of the Virgin Mary is the Lord of all. We look to Jesus and see in him God's will to help us and to save us. What seems impossible is not so with God—with God there are unlimited possibilities and all we need is the faith to accept and receive what God is offering.

There are many gifts given to us by God, if we are open to them. The greatest gift of all is faith in the Lord Jesus. Faith is also the key to all the other gifts, yet it is not an easy one to receive. Faith seems to contradict modern science and common sense and flies in the face of post-modern cynicism and skepticism. The claim that God was in Christ reconciling the world is offensive

to our human sensibilities. How could a virgin conceive? How could God become a man? How could the death of this one man reconcile a whole world? How could the events of two thousand years ago on the other side of the world mean fullness of life to us here and now—with the promise of eternal life to come? Faith in Jesus Christ is the greatest impossibility, yet it comes to us if we open our hearts and minds to receive it.

George Whitfield was a powerful preacher who preached repentance in England and here in America in the eighteenth century. He visited one wealthy family and saw to his dismay that the Son of God had no abiding place in their home. Before he left, Whitfield took a diamond ring and scratched on the windowpane of his room, “One thing you lack!” These four words pierced the heart of that family. They came to realize that with all their money, with the beauty and comfort of their home, even with their outward religious practices, they lacked faith. They were without Jesus. They, and we, need faith to receive the blessing of God, faith to see the miracles of God all around us, and faith to turn what seems impossible to possible for us personally.

God has many blessings in store for everyone here and for our congregation. If we look to Jesus, each one of us, and believe in Jesus, miracles can happen. We can change. We can become the people God wants us to be. We can reach out to others with the wonderful message of God’s grace and power and love in Christ. God can turn what seems impossible into wonderful possibilities for this congregation—for me and for you. Blessings without number can be ours when we put our faith in Jesus.

Savvy Bible readers often come to Luke chapter 1 and say, “Hmm, this is something I’ve seen before; this is a story I’ve heard before.” But then the story tilts. The familiar gives way to the unfamiliar, and we get a sense that something extraordinary, something striking, and quite possibly very wonderful is about to happen. Fact is, something incredibly gracious is about to happen.

**And it does! For nothing is impossible with God! Amen.**