

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A little boy and girl were singing their favorite Christmas carol in church the Sunday before Christmas. The boy concluded "Silent Night" with the words, "Sleep in heavenly beans." "No," his sister corrected, "not beans—peas!"

Well, here we are on the Sunday before Christmas and although we will not sing "Silent Night" today, our hearts do sing Christmas songs that convey the message about the wonderful love that God has for us. Today as we look at the precious story of how Mary's life was suddenly changed, may we be reconnected with the mystery of God's love for us.

The scripture we heard Jack read has us looking in on a scene involving an angel named Gabriel, breaking the unexpected news to an ordinary very young woman who she is going to have a baby boy. I remember as a young woman, yet years older than Mary, wanting to become pregnant and feeling frustrated because it did not happen as quickly as I wanted. Mary, on the other hand, did not have baby-wants on her radar yet. She was in the throes of betrothal to a man named Joseph who had a carpenter business.

Betrothal was a year-long period of time between an engagement that Mary's parents arranged with Joseph and the time when they would actually get married. It was a binding agreement involving trust and commitment between the couple. It could only be dissolved by divorce.

Joseph, likewise, was not expecting to become a father so soon, especially since the couple had not yet consummated their yet-to-arrive marriage. Joseph's suspicions that Mary had been unfaithful are understandable and his thoughts of divorcing Mary seem justifiable. But we learn from reading Matthew 1:18-25, that an angel paid a visit to Joseph in a dream to confirm Mary's story and told him to continue with his plans to marry her. Joseph followed the directions of the angel, saving Mary from a divorce and a life of begging or prostitution to survive.

Olivia, five, and her best friend, Claire, were in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia was an angel. Before the show, a young boy went around the dressing room saying, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared that she was an angel.

The boy then turned to Claire and repeated the question to her: “I’m a sheep, what are you?”

Claire simply said, “I’m Mary.”

Realizing Claire was a lead character, the boy tried to justify his own role. “It’s hard being a sheep, you know,” he said.

“Yes,” said Claire innocently, “but it’s also hard being a virgin.”

If we approach this text with a number of historical, biographical, even biological questions, we will find the gospel writer, Luke, a physician does not answer them. While we might think Luke’s main focus is on the virgin Mary, he actually wants to direct our attention to Jesus, the Son of the Most High, Immanuel. He presents to us three themes to contemplate.

The first theme Gabriel states explicitly, “Nothing is impossible for God.” You may remember that Mary’s relative, Elizabeth, was unable to conceive a child during the normal childbearing years of her life; yet God gifted her and her husband Zechariah with a child, John the Baptist, when Elizabeth was beyond her child-bearing years. While this seems highly unlikely, we read several times in the Old Testament scriptures that this unlikely occurrence happened for others too, such as Sarah and Abraham and Hannah.

God made the seemingly impossible happen for these couples. And here, as we find with a virgin pregnancy, God makes the seemingly impossible happen in order to fulfill his plan to come to earth through a human being, his Son. Over and over, Luke tells us both in this gospel and in the book of Acts, which he also wrote, that God can do the impossible. The sick were healed; Jesus arose from the dead; and the Holy Spirit came upon those who believed; and a new community, the church, was formed. Yes, events that we find hard to believe, God makes happen revealing to us that nothing is impossible for God.

A second theme we find in Luke’s telling of this story is one that is often overlooked. Gabriel greeted Mary saying, “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you!” He assured her, “You have found favor with God.” The Greek translation of the original text, “favor,” could also be translated as “grace”.

Luke doesn’t tell us what makes Mary deserving of God’s grace. Unlike in other instances, such as that of Elizabeth and Zechariah who, we are told, were righteous and blameless and kept the commandments and prayed to God, Luke doesn’t give us a hint about what makes Mary so special. Luke doesn’t mention one word about Mary’s virtues or even her vices to explain why God chose her. We make the assumptions that her qualities must have been nearly perfect to make her the choice to be the mother of Jesus.

The point here, then, is that God chooses because he chooses. Mary did not earn or deserve the honor of becoming the mother of Jesus any more than any other woman. We should not be surprised by this truth. The scriptures reveal time and time again when God has carried out his purposes through the most unlikely people. God chooses to have grace. The biblical message is not one of rewarding the virtuous or punishing the imperfect, but is a message of the relentlessly undeserved nature of God’s grace.

The third theme that Luke communicates comes with Mary’s response to the angel’s announcement of God’s grace upon her. She identified herself as a servant for the Lord. A better translation from the Greek for “servant of the Lord” would be “slave of the Lord.” This, her first response to the angel’s announcement, tells us that Mary recognizes that she has been selected by God and that God’s choosing leaves no room for her own preference. In other words, Mary’s service comes about as a result of God’s plan—not her own. She simply recognizes that she has been chosen to fulfill this role in God’s plan.

But then, with the second part of her response when she says “Let it be with me according to your word,” Mary gave her consent to God’s plan. We know from the words of her song, the Magnificat, which follows this text, that the immense importance of the Christ child revealed to her. But here in the early moments of this revelation of her role in God’s plan, she simply consents to that which she could not possibly fully understand.

God has a plan for each one of us. As God reveals it to us, he may not always reveal the significance to that our role plays in his plan; nor may he reveal the end results of what we are called to do.

Yet we can recognize, if we so choose, that we have been chosen by God who can do and chooses to do the impossible—a God who chooses to have grace, a God who chooses to call the unlikely to fulfill a role, all of which are of high importance in his holy plan. He does this because he loves us and wants all of humanity to know of his great love.

During this Christmas season, may we gaze into the manger to see the Holy Child with open hearts for what he brings to us. Although the circumstances of our lives may be difficult, frustrating, even painful, let us not forget, that God, our Great Creator who is Love himself, chose to come to earth through a babe born in a manger, using the most unlikely of circumstances to make the extraordinary point that he loves us. From the deepest longing of your soul, sing of his love, and like Mary, the mother of Jesus, welcome and receive his love and his blessing, as yet another one of his favored children. Amen.