

Title: Nothing Impossible
Biblical Text: Luke 1:26-38
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Luke 1:26-38

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. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.

Being a good person and being wealthy seem impossible. Doesn't it feel like we have to choose? To be a good person, at some point, we likely have to demonstrate compassion toward a person when the bottom line tells us to ignore our feelings and make a better financial decision. What's more, many jobs that help people with basic needs don't often make much money. To be wealthy, we likely have to justify some questionable moral behavior. Some of the most lucrative industries exploit people. While this is, of course, not a hard and fast rule, it feels like it. It seems more often than not, morality and money are at odds with each other. However, in Jesus' day and our own, we still think goodness and wealth are indications of God's blessing and salvation.

This was illustrated one day when a rich man walked up to Jesus and asked him what he had to do to have eternal life (see Matthew 19:16). Jesus responded with a moral question. He asked if he followed the commandments. The man said he did. If you know the story, then you know Jesus followed up by inviting him to give all his positions to the poor. In other words, he was asking him to choose. *Do you want to be a good person? Or do you want to be a wealthy person?* The man walked away sorrowfully.

Now, what's most interesting about this story, I think, isn't the interaction between Jesus and the rich man ... it's Jesus and his disciples. After the man walks away, Jesus tells his disciples, ***Read Matthew 19:23-24 ... “Truly, I say to you, only with***

difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Through hyperbole, Jesus is conveying an

impossibility. It's impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom. Or, as he says elsewhere, *you can't serve God and money* (see Matthew 6:24). This was striking to the disciples because money and morality were indications of blessing and salvation. So they asked Jesus, *who can be saved?* In other words, their whole notion of morality, blessing, and salvation was upended before their eyes.

It's impossible.

Our story today is fraught with similar impossibilities. And, like Jesus' disciples, it's meant to upend our understanding of God, his world, and his work in the world.

So, here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- A *spiritual* impossibility.
- A *political* impossibility.
- A *human* impossibility.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: A Spiritual Impossibility (vv.26-27,28-30, John 1:46)

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has become revered in our collective imagination. She's iconic in the religious art world, mainly Catholic and Orthodox traditions. I learned this week that the technical term for a Mary art piece is a *Madonna*, instituted after the Italian Renaissance (17th century). Protestants and modern-day evangelicals usually don't even think about Mary outside of Christmastime. (It might feel odd to some of you that we're studying this passage before the Advent season.)

Nevertheless, images of Mary have been ubiquitous since the earliest days of the Christian Church. Some traditions even believe that Luke himself painted some of the first Madonnas.

Of course, religion's love for Mary goes beyond art. Believers venerate Mary in many ways and even pray to her, considering her to be not just the mother of Jesus but divine herself. So, *where does Mary belong in our spiritual consciousness?*
What should we think about her and learn from her?

Well, with such an iconic reputation, it's easy to forget how obscure and insignificant Mary's story begins. She was essentially a nobody from nowhere. That's the picture we're given when the angel Gabriel visits her six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy. Look at v.26. ***Read Luke 1:26-27 ... 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. So, Luke gives us a few indications here of Mary's humble pedigree ...

- First, Mary's from Nazareth. This place was so forgettable that Luke had to explain to Theophilus (his friend to whom this gospel is addressed) that it was *a city in Galilee*. Famously, the disciple Nathanael made fun of Nazareth as if it were some despised backwater town. He quipped, ***Read John 1:46 ... "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*** So Mary's home was of little spiritual importance. Luke's story has moved from the prominence of the temple in the heart of Israelite culture to the commonness of a forgettable town.
- Secondly, Mary is unmarried. Of course, we're told she's engaged or betrothed (so likely she'll marry within a year). Marriage was the foundational social status for a woman in first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman life. In some cultures today and in some people's minds, marriage is still the institution that brings stability, value, and meaning to a person's life, especially a woman's.
- Lastly, she's a virgin. Luke describes Mary as a virgin twice in a single verse (v.27). He's drawing attention not just to Mary's lack of sexual experience but also to her age. In addition to Mary's limited social prominence, unlike her cousin Elizabeth, who is "***advanced in year,***" Mary is really young.

Most think as young as 12 or 13. And we often disregard the young as much as we disregard the elderly.

Mary's situation leaves much to be desired, especially from a spiritual standpoint.

This is our *spiritual* impossibility. She is unknown. She is unattached. She is untested. By every spiritual measure, Mary is not a candidate for great things. She's certainly not someone you'd paint or pray to. And yet, the angel Gabriel has a message for her. *Read Luke 1:28-29 ... And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.* Before we get to the content of Gabriel's message, we should consider how he addresses Mary. Because it directly confronts this *spiritual* impossibility. Despite her humble roots, Gabriel says Mary is the favored one, and God is with her. In most English Bibles, the word *favor* is related to the Greek root word *charis* ... which means *grace*. The word *Greetings* shares the same root word. It's as if the angel is saying *Grace to you, graced one.*

That's what upends Mary's story, and that's what changes all of our stories. Grace makes the *spiritually* impossible possible.

The language of grace is passive. It's unearned. It's never achieved. It can only be received as a gift. One scholar explains that Mary "*is honored by God not because of her own merit or because she has done anything, but simply because she is a*

chosen vessel for this demonstration of God's grace" (Bock, 58). This may be unsettling for you and me. Grace always unsettles our humanly crafted concepts of fairness, value, morality, and meaning. Grace ruins the transactional momentum of a broken world. We're used to an environment in which reward and achievement can be explained by effort. *I work hard, and I'm promoted or blessed.* But the only explanation for God's grace is God's love. That's unsettling. The Heavenly Father favors Mary and bestows this unmerited gift upon her because he loves her. He loves his daughter.

My sisters and brothers, the same is true of you. Your Heavenly Father is gracious toward you not because you were born in a spectacular city, not because you've ascended the social, vocational, and religious ladders of this life, and not because you've been faithful, kind, generous, and righteous. The only explanation for the Father's grace upon us is the Father's love for us. He's gracious toward you because he is gracious. While this might seem demeaning, it's actually really good news. If God blesses people because of *his* nature and character (which doesn't change), then you can rest assured that his grace and love will not dissipate when your affections, behaviors, and situations change ... and they always do, *don't they?* Therefore, if you move to a new city ... if your married status changes ... if your sexual experiences change ... God's grace endures. His grace is based on him, not you.

Considering our own moral obscurity and shortcomings, like Mary, we should all be overlooked. Nevertheless, it's God's favor, not the power of our religious effort,

that makes us valued, favored, and loved. Grace makes the *spiritually* impossible possible.

Movement 2: The Political Impossibility (vv.31-33; 5, Matthew 1:21, Mark 1:15, Philippians 2:9-11, 2 Samuel 7:16)

Mary's lack of spiritual credentials is only one of many obstacles in the story. After the angel eases her fear and confusion with grace, Gabriel tells her she will be a mom and that her son will be a king. Look at v.31. *Read Luke 1:31-33 ... And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.* We're introduced to Jesus not simply as Mary's son but also as royalty. Notice the language: *Jesus is the Son of the Most High, he's going to sit on a throne, he's going to reign, and he has a kingdom.* Luke is helping us see what we often overlook about the Messianic promise and Jesus' arrival: the *political* impossibility of it all.

You see, the world in which Jesus was born presents us with some serious political tension. As we learned from the previous passage, the region already had a king, a throne, and a kingdom. Look back at v.5. *Read Luke 1:5 ... In the days of Herod, king of Judea.* These were the days of King Herod. But all his power was

borrowed. He reigned during Rome's occupation of Israel. One historian explains, "*Endowed with strength, stamina, and shrewdness, with a gift for taking strategic risks and landing on his feet, a passionate builder, artistically sensitive and sensuous, but barbarically cruel to his enemies, real or imagined, Herod managed to prosper in an era of political intrigue and dangerous liaisons by political sagacity and a veneer of cultural grandeur*" (Edwards, 32). His power was a show. Ultimately, Herod's oppressive rule represented the reign of another: *Caesar*. The Roman emperor was the authority of the day and land. No matter what people say and think about Herod, Caesar is king. Even in Herod's region, the controlling ethos of the day was that *Caesar is Lord!*

This presents a volatile environment for a Jewish Messiah to be born. That means Mary is being entrusted with a treasonous message. She's being invited into political controversy. In her day, calling Caesar *and* Jesus king was *politically impossible*. There can only be one. It's no different today. And I know that might seem odd to us. After all, we're Americans. We've constructed a democracy with a clear separation of Church and State, *right*? However, this separation was introduced not to keep the Church out of politics but to keep the State from instituting a national religion. That's what the founders of the AND Campaign communicate in their book *Compassion & Conviction*. (The AND Campaign is an organization that educates and organizes Christians around civic and cultural engagement.) Contrary to our common conceptions, they suggest that "*Every Christian in America is political*" (3). This has been true of Jesus and his people from the very beginning. Jesus' kingship and kingdom are highly political.

When he introduces Mary to her son, Gabriel tells us much about the nature of Jesus' kingship and kingdom ...

- He's got a name. His name is Jesus. Matthew explains that Jesus means salvation or God saves. When the angel visits Joseph, he tells him that Mary ***Read Matthew 1:21 ... will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*** Jesus is the savior who forgives sins, heals the sick, and feeds the hungry. He puts the powers of this world on notice. He liberates those in bondage (see Luke 4:18-19). Of course, he doesn't just do this by coming to us but also by dying for us. That's why ***Read Philippians 2:9-11 ... "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*** His name is Jesus, and he is king.
- He's got a throne. A throne is all about power. It's not just where royalty sits; it's where they execute their official responsibilities. It's where a king makes decisions and exercises his power to write the law, protect his people, extend the boundaries of his rule, and generally represent his position as the authority. And even though many bad kings occupied David's throne, God always promised that David's ***"throne shall be established forever"*** (2

Samuel 7:16). Gabriel is telling Mary that the promise is coming to fruition. Jesus has the power. He sits on the throne.

- He's got a kingdom. A kingdom is about home. When we talk about Jesus' kingdom, we're talking about his realm. When he came to earth, he brought his realm, he brought his home, he brought heaven with him. In one of his first sermons, Jesus said, *Read Mark 1:15 ... "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* Throughout his teaching ministry, Jesus explained what his home is like: It's where the poor belong, where mourners are comforted, where the hungry are satisfied, and where the merciful find mercy (see Matthew 5). We're talking about a place where his will, glory, and sovereignty are in full force. This is our new home. It's here for us and our neighbors through Jesus ... and it's coming more and more.

In Mary's day, Caesar promised salvation, power, and a new home. Today, many make similar promises. The most explicit examples may be in politics, but they can still be hard to discern. And so, followers of Jesus must learn to read between the lines. When our politicians tell us about their plans, vision for America, and ability and power to deliver, we must hold their claims at arm's length. There's only one king. However, we also evaluate their claims and consider which candidate's vision most closely aligns with the kingdom Jesus is bringing. Not only so, but we have to be honest with ourselves. Because, like Herod's power, our politicians, influencers, and leaders only have borrowed power. Underneath our love for a candidate or

political party is often a love for ourselves ... a desire for power, control, righteousness, being seen on the right side of history ... our own kingdoms. You see, the real *political* battleground is always the human heart.

When King Herod hears about King Jesus, he's less than enthused. He tries to kill him. Herod is so threatened by Jesus that he murders all the male children in the region who are two years old and younger (see Matthew 2:16). Herod had a choice. It's the same choice we all have when we realize the *political* impossibility of Jesus' birth. We fight, or we bow down. In the words of pastor Tim Keller, "*Either you'll have to 'kill' Jesus or you'll have to crown him but the one thing you can't do is just say 'What an interesting guy'*" (Twitter, November 21, 2015). Jesus is a direct threat to whatever or whoever we think will save us. He's a threat to whatever power we love and trust. Jesus is a direct threat to the kingdoms we're building.

But what's marvelous and otherworldly about Jesus, and why the politically impossible becomes possible, is Jesus' death. If we try to kill him, and we all do, he doesn't fight back. At least he doesn't retaliate and try to kill you back. Instead, he lays down his life. You see, Jesus makes the *politically* impossible possible through humility. Humility makes the *politically* impossible possible.

Movement 3: The Human Impossibility

(vv.34,35-36,37-38, Genesis 1:2b, Exodus 40:35)

God's grace makes the *spiritual* impossible possible. Jesus' humility makes the *politically* impossible possible. But we'll see, Mary isn't perplexed by the spiritual or the political. She's wrapped up in the humanity of it all. *Read Luke 1:34 ... And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"* This is a very basic and natural request for more information. Mary isn't being rebellious. She's not questioning God. She's asking him a question. And we should always ask God our questions. She's naming her limitations as a human being and of experience. Mary is identifying the *human impossibility*. It's as if she's saying, *I trust this will happen, but how will it happen? What's this going to look like?*

If you remember, when Zechariah questioned God, he was rendered silent (see vv.18,20). But when Mary asks a question, the angel is happy to explain it to her. *Read Luke 1:35-36 ... 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. 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."* There are two parts to the angel's answer and one proof. Two ways this will happen and one assurance that it will happen.

- First ... though she's a virgin, Mary will conceive because the Holy Spirit will come upon her. *What's that mean?* Well, biblically, this should take our

minds to the Creation narrative. When the earth was without form and darkness was everywhere, ***Read Genesis 1:2b ... the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*** The Spirit was over a space of nothingness where he was about to create everything. He came over a place without the necessary elements to create life. Gabriel is saying that Mary will have a child like the earth was filled with life and order. Both are without the essential elements to create life because God alone is necessary to create life. God will again bring something out of nothing.

- Second ... though she's a virgin, Mary will conceive because the Most High will overshadow her. *What's that mean?* Well, biblically this recalls a moment when God "overshadowed" the tabernacle. ***Read Exodus 40:35 ... And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*** When the tabernacle was complete, God filled it with his presence and glory (see Edwards, 49). In short, the angel's answer is God. Mary is obviously familiar with her limitations in creating life from nothing. However, the angel is helping her see that her limits are meant to point her to the limitless nature of God. As God filled the temple with his unmatched power and glory, he will empower Mary to do the impossible.

As proof, Gabriel shares that a similar thing is happening with Elizabeth. He then summarizes all of this for Mary in a profoundly memorable way. ***Read Luke 1:37-38 ... For nothing will be impossible with God.*** 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. The human impossibility is made possible by God himself. Nothing will be impossible with God.

Grace makes the *spiritually* impossible possible.

Humility makes the *politically* impossible possible.

God himself makes the *humanly* impossible possible.

What impossibility are you facing today? Is it spiritual? Is it political? Is it human? What fears tell you that the future is dark, broken, lonely, or hopeless?

When Jesus upended his disciples, understanding that goodness and money meant salvation, they asked him ... *who can be saved?* Salvation felt impossible. Jesus responded with a hopeful and sweet reminder that tells us and his disciples that what Mary went through wasn't simply her story ... but all of ours. Jesus looked at them and said, **Read Matthew 19:26 ... “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”** My sisters and brothers, whatever you are facing feels impossible because it is. But, with God ... his grace ... his humility ... and himself ... the impossible is possible.