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Child

This morning we are going to talk about the very beginning of the Christmas story. Does anyone remember what happened first? (Children respond. Offer help as needed.)

The angel came and delivered some news to Mary. What did the angel tell Mary? (Children respond.) The angel told Mary not to be afraid because she had been chosen by God to do something special. The angel said that Mary was going to have a baby. This would be no ordinary baby; this baby would be God's son. The angel told Mary that this child would be different from other babies because God had some very important things for him to do.

What news this was from the angel! It was a miracle! But Mary must have been a bit confused and maybe even a little scared. It must have been difficult to understand everything the angel had said. How could it be? How could something like this happen to her? How could she be the mother of God's son?

The Bible tells us that the angel told Mary something else before he left. The angel said, "With God, nothing is impossible." With God, nothing is impossible.

Say that with me, "With God, nothing is impossible." Say it again, "With God, nothing is impossible."

Do you believe that? It's true. No matter how impossible something seems, no matter how much we believe we cannot do something, if it's God's will, and if we are willing to try, nothing is impossible for us.

Imagine there is someone who is always mean to you. Maybe she says bad things to you or always tries to get you in trouble. You just can't stand this person, but you know God wants you to be nice to her. It seems impossible, doesn't it? But it's not. With God's help, you can do it.

Suppose God wants you to be a missionary when you grow up. Suppose he wants you to go far away and tell others about him and his love. Impossible? No. Why? Because, say it with me, "With God, nothing is impossible."

Mary was confused and afraid and she did not fully understand how something so important could be happening to her. It seemed impossible, but it did happen because -- say it with me one more time, "With God, nothing is impossible!" I want you to remember that. God bless you.

Adult

Sometimes I preach on something that is not the gospel, yet fits into the season. There are some memories in the Army that will stick with us forever. Dec 16, 2016 I was at Camp Buehring with soldiers I was going to travel with to Syria. There was a Christmas Concert. There was a specialist who worked on engines singing a song. I will never forget the beauty of her voice ( when she finished there was such applause and stomping that I worried the tent would come down.) and the song, she sang. I heard it before I was going to write my sermon. I think the Lord put it in my heart because tears filled my eyes.

One of the most beautiful of the modern Christmas songs was written by a man who is best known, perhaps, as a comedian. His name is Mark Lowry. Lowry is also a musician of some note. He performed for many years with the Gaither Vocal band. In 1984 he was asked to pen some words for his local church choir and he wrote a poem that began like this, “Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?”

A few years later guitarist Buddy Greene added a perfectly matching tune and a wonderful song was born. “Mary, did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? Mary, did you know when you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God!” Each of the little couplets touches the heart in a wonderful way. “Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation? Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?” (1) The song’s been around now for nearly two decades. Listen for it on the radio. The most popular version is sung by Kenny Rogers and Wynonna Judd. Mary, did you know . . . ?

How could Mary know what was happening to her when the angel Gabriel came to her long ago? Only Luke tells this story. The Gospel of Luke is often called the Gospel of womanhood because Luke has so many positive stories about women. In fact, there are eight positive stories about women in Luke’s gospel. Later in Luke’s Gospel you will discover stories about Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and the woman who anointed Jesus’ body for burial. In the book of Acts, also written by Luke, we hear another positive story about a business woman, Lydia, the maker of purple.

Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth from Mary’s point of view. The angel Gabriel is the messenger of God. He has already announced to an elderly gentleman named Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, despite her old age. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. Then Gabriel visits Mary. Following Gabriel’s visit to her, you may remember, Mary visits Elizabeth and the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumps when they meet. You won’t find these kinds of details in the other Gospels. (2)

Luke begins today’s story by telling us that in the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Then Luke adds these words, “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

**What does it mean to be favored by God?** This is an important question. Evidently it doesn’t mean that your life is going to be a bed of roses.

Listen as Luke continues, “But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’

“‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’”

This is interesting. Mary is not married. She’s still a virgin. And she’s going to have a baby. Is this something she should get excited about? Zechariah and Elizabeth had been married for many years. For most of those years they had been praying for a child. The birth of their son John in their old age was literally an answer to prayer. I doubt that the same thing can be said for Mary. She was a teenager and she was about to become an unwed mother. Whoopee! Mary and Joseph lived within a strict community regulated by religious laws and customs. Mary could have been stoned for being pregnant and unmarried. And imagine Joseph’s hurt. She’s supposed to be happy about this? God has an interesting way of showing His favor.

Years ago a psychologist named Thomas Holmes developed a scale for measuring stress. He assigned numerical values to events that cause stress such as the loss of job, moving to a new city, a new relationship. Dr. Holmes even included Christmas on his stress list. He decided that just a normal Christmas was worth a hefty 14 stress points. Some of you understand. You’re up to 15 or 20 stress points right now.

A writer by the name of Bridget Kuhns took Dr. Holmes’ scale and applied it to Mary. Holmes calculated that any pregnancy earns 40 points: an unwanted pregnancy, add 20 more. A change in living conditions Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth earns 25 more. Marriage to Joseph: 50 points. A change in financial status: 38 points.

Surely there must have been words between them when she discovered that he had not made reservations at the inn: score 35 points for an argument with a spouse.

And then the birth‑‑39 points: 16 for a change in sleeping habits; 15 for a change in eating habits. Not to mention all those uninvited guests: shepherds and angels coming and going and wise men from the East.

Psychologist Thomas Holmes says that people get sick when they reach 200 points on his stress scale. Ms. Kuhns calculates that Mary’s ordeal earned her a record 424 points. (3) This, of course, does not even include the flight to Egypt. Or even more importantly, the experience of watching her beloved son die as a common criminal on a cross. Is this what it means to be favored of God? Evidently being favored of God does not protect you from life’s bumps and bruises.

This is an important truth. It is so easy for us to say when things are going our way, “The Lord sure is blessing us.” That sounds so pious, doesn’t it? We are blessed. We may be in for a big surprise. It may be that one day we will be the ones who will hear the Lord say, “I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink . . .” (Matthew 25:31‑46) Maybe the reason things seem to be going our way is that we are living only for ourselves. It’s easy to have a merry Christmas with lots of fine presents under the tree when we insulate ourselves from the world’s problems. Rather than blessing us, God may actually despise our opulent self-indulgence.

Conversely, if we are going through a difficult time in our life right now when we feel like we can barely hold on, God may be very close to us. The angel Gabriel, in saying that Mary was blessed by God, was not saying that God would make her way easy. What he was saying was that Mary would be used of God, and in the long run of life, this is what being blessed means. How about you? Can you say that right now you are being used by God for a purpose? Be careful whom you call favored by God.

Gabriel told Mary that she was favored by God and that she would bear a son. And Mary asked a sensible question: “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” Good question.

Here is how the angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

Underline that last sentence: **Nothing is impossible with God.** I have often wondered, is it anymore difficult to believe that God gave Mary a virgin birth than it is to believe that Abraham and Sarah and Zechariah and Elizabeth bore children at an advanced age? Certainly Mary in her shame could have lied about the visit of an angel, but there was no way that Elizabeth, who was far beyond child bearing years could make up a story about her pregnancy. It was a miracle! If Elizabeth were much younger than Zechariah, there could be another explanation, but that was not the case. It was a miracle. And Jesus’ birth was a miracle. If scientists were to announce tomorrow that a virgin birth had been created in the laboratory, not a one of us would dispute it. Science can do such amazing things nowadays. But we want to deny the God who created science the ability to manipulate the laws of the universe and to give a baby a unique birth. That’s absurd. Jesus’ birth was a miracle. Underline it again. Nothing is impossible with God.

Remember that the next time you are in a hard place. Nothing is impossible with God. Now there are many theologians and Bible scholars who have real difficulty with the notion of a virgin birth. For one thing, Isaiah didn’t really prophesy that a virgin will conceive and bear a son. A better translation is simply that a “young woman” will conceive and bear a son. That’s all right. It really doesn’t matter to most of us how God sent Christ into the world, only that He did.

God never overpowers us with certainty. Everything we know about God is seen “through a glass darkly.” That is what faith is. It is never certainty. It’s faith. There can always be another explanation. Some Protestant churches used to say the Mary was raped by a Roman soldier (which is found in some commentaries) This is so we can still be free to say yes to God or to say no. If you have difficulty with the idea of miracles, then God does not hold that against you. Many fine Christians don’t believe in the virgin birth. All we’re saying today is, when it comes to God, be careful what you say is impossible.

Be careful whom you call blessed. Be careful what you say is impossible. **And finally, be thankful that this young woman said yes to God.**You see, Mary was free to say no to God just as we are. God never forces Himself on anyone. But when the angel Gabriel gave Mary the news that she would bear God’s son, here is how Mary replied. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Mary became the mother of the Savior because she was obedient to God.

Obedience is not a fashionable word in our modern world, is it? An older gentleman was commenting to his wife that couples don’t use the word “obey” in marriage ceremonies anymore.

“Too bad, isn’t it?” he added, “It used to lend a little humor to the occasion.”

Obedience isn’t in fashion in a do-your-own-thing society. Yet obedience is an important part of the Christian life. There are some things that people would never force themselves to do except in obedience to God.

Christmas 1988 was my first Christmas as a pastor. On Christmas Eve I was watching Mother Teresa embrace a young man withered dying with AIDS. He was crying and she just held him. We did not know much about AIDS then except it led to a horrible death. I covered for a neighboring priest who was the chaplain in Nyack Hospital. He called me and asked me to cover so in I went. As soon as I got in I was told a dying Catholic wanted to see a priest. So off I went. He was in an isolation room. I had to gown up, wear a mask and gloves because he had AIDS. I was told to keep my distance because it could be spred through the air or by physical contact, They just didn’t know. I went him and introduced myself. HE sat up in bed and I sat in the be opposite him, He was in the hospital for surgery it was in the tests for that they discovered the AIDs and he didn’t have long to live. He asked for confession and anointing. When a man has hit bottom and goes to confession, I remembered Mother Teresa and I spoke to him of the Parable of the Prodigal Son and how the father welcomed him back in love. It was a lengthy confession and he seemed at peace. I got up and walked over and anointed him, He started crying, stood up and gave me a hug I thought would break my ribs. His tears were running down my cheeks. I stood there thanking Mother Teresa for her example. I remained there in his hug until he ended it. When I got out of the room, I had to wash and was then told to come in next week for an AIDS test and every month for six months.

This is something that priests do. It is our calling/. It is our obedience to God.

my life has been blessed immeasurably by my obedience to God. After all I have been blessed by all of you in my life. That’s the message of Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel. Mary did you know? Mary couldn’t have known where this encounter would lead her. I never expected to be a missionary in Ukraine or enter the Army at age 50 and serve in a combat zone at 65. Like Mary, I didn’t know but trusted in God,

 today, two thousand years later, we know that truly she was favored by God. Be careful whom you called blessed. Be careful what you call impossible. And finally, be thankful that this Jewish teenager was obedient to God. That’s the key to having a life that is truly blessed.

1. Composed by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene © 1991 Word Music/Rufus Music/ascap.

2. Ed Markquart, http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\_b\_the\_virgin\_maryGA.htm.

3. David Beckett, D.Min., http://home.gci.net/~stjohn1/sermons/2001/dec23.01.htm.

2

5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, who were participating in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia played an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room proclaiming to all who could hear him, “I’m a sheep.” Then asking, “What are you?” Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel.

The boy then turned to Claire, who was still struggling into her costume with her mother’s help. He repeated the question to her: “I’m a sheep, what are you?”

Claire simply said, “I’m Mary.”

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, the boy felt he needed to justify his own role. “It’s hard being a sheep, you know,” he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part.

Claire’s equally serious response was humorously profound. “Yes,” said Claire innocently, “but it’s also hard being a virgin, you know.” (1)

Well, yes, it’s hard being a virgin. Let me hasten to say it’s even harder being a teen-aged mom. Scholars tell us that, according to the customs of that land, Mary may have been 13 or 14 years of age when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and made the announcement that would change her life forever. Gabriel said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

What an amazing experience! Do you remember when you were Mary’s age? I love the way Pastor John Nadasi deals with Mary’s situation. He envisions Mary as being fifteen.

“Fifteen,” he writes. “It’s an awkward time. Your body is somewhere between childhood and adulthood. Hormones are doing all sorts of weird things to your body . . . And there is this great race to grow up. Still, at fifteen you are not old enough to drive a car, vote, stay out late, or live on your own. At fifteen, there are a lot of things that you are not allowed to do. Now, close your eyes for a moment. Remember yourself at fifteen years old. You are in Junior High, interested in things fifteen year olds are interested in. You are still a child living in your parents’ home. Then, one night, there is a disturbance in another room of your house. You get up to investigate and there, in the middle of your living room stands this beautiful, Supernatural, and absolutely terrifying angelic presence that speaks these words to you . . . ‘Greetings Favored One, The Lord is With You.’ What would you do? What would be going through your mind? Would you be wondering how fast you could get out the back door and down the street?” (2)
I think that would be my response to this surprise announcement by an angel. Luke tells us that Mary was thoroughly shaken by this announcement. But she does not bolt. She does not run. And Gabriel continues: “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her .

An amazing story about an amazing event in history. **An angel appears to a teen-aged girl and tells her that she will give birth to the Son of God.** It is an absurd story. It is a story that challenges credulity. Even some Christians smirk when they talk about it, as if this is the only story that Mary and Joseph could come up with to explain this inconvenient pregnancy. But this is what we believe. God came to earth at Christmas. From his birth to his baptism to his death on the cross, in Jesus Christ God walked the dusty plains of this small planet and experienced what it means to be human . . . What it means to have family and friends . . . What it is to laugh and to love and to lose . . . What it is to suffer and to face death. An angel appears to a teen-aged young woman and tells her that she will give birth to the Son of God.

In the play Green Pastures, which ran for many years on Broadway, playwright Marc Connelly has a moving and memorable scene. The Lord is anxiously looking out over the parapets of heaven, trying to decide what to do with the sinful situation on earth. Gabriel enters with his horn tucked under his arm. Sensing the Lord’s dilemma, he brushes his lips across the trumpet to keep the feel of it and asks, “Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?”

“No, no,” said the Lord, “don’t touch the trumpet, not yet.”

God continues to worry with the problem. Gabriel asks the Lord again what he plans to do. Will he send someone to tend to the situation? Who will it be? Gabriel makes some suggestions. “How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?”

Without looking back at Gabriel, God said, “I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!!” (3)

And, of course, that is what God did. In Jesus Christ the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But why? What is the meaning of it all?

Years ago Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, explained the miracle of Christmas with a parable:

Once upon a time there lived a king who loved a poor maiden. This king was an all-powerful king. He could choose any maiden in his kingdom for his bride. But the maiden did not know the king or suspect his love for her. This posed a problem for the king. He knew if he approached her as the king, she would be awed by the differences between them. She might admire him for his power and status, but she could not forget that he was the king and that she was but a humble maiden. Because he truly loved her the king wanted her to love him for himself, not for his power. The king considered the possibility of somehow secretly elevating the maiden to the rank of a princess. Then they would be equals. But he quickly realized the folly of this approach. She would see through his deception. And if she did not, he feared the transformation might alter her character. And he loved her as she was.

The king grieved. How could he help his beloved to understand him as he wished to be understood, as a lover rather than a king? Finally, the way became clear. If their union could not be effected through the maiden’s elevation to the king, it must be attempted through the king’s descent to the maiden. The king realized he must appear in the likeness of a servant, as one humble enough to

serve her. So he clothed himself in a beggar’s cloak and went out to meet the maiden. Did she accept his love? What do you think?

An angel appears to a virgin, and tells her that she will give birth to God’s child. This was God’s way of seeking to woo humanity. God would humble Himself and live among us so that we might come to know His true nature. God had no desire to overpower us, but to enter into a relationship with us. And so God chose this young woman, a virgin.

You are aware that some scholars have questioned the virgin birth. It is a beautiful part of the story, however, and many believers treasure it.

It reminds me of a somewhat humorous story about that champion of women’s rights, Sojourner Truth. Sojourner Truth was a former slave who, after she was free became a fearless public speaker and tireless crusader for human rights. It is said she electrified audiences throughout this country in the 19th century.

Sojourner Truth attended a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1863. One of the women attending the convention recorded what happened at that event. While Sojourner Truth was speaking a heckler shouted out that women shouldn’t have as many rights as men because Christ wasn’t a woman. Raising herself to her full height of nearly six feet, Sojourner Truth answered like this, “Then that little man in back there, he say women can’t have as much rights as men, ’cause Christ weren’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from?” she asked rhetorically. “From God and a woman! Man had nothin’ to do with him.” (4)

Sojourner Truth was right. According to Luke’s Gospel, man had nothing to do with him. An angel appears to a virgin and tells her that she will give birth to the Son of God. All of history was changed by Gabriel’s announcement to Mary.

**But it was also changed by Mary’s response**: “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

No hesitation, no “I’ll get back to you tomorrow.” Mary answers, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” Gabriel announces to her that she will be a mother even though she has not formally been wed to her beloved Joseph, has not even been intimate with him, and she replies, “Do with me as you will.”

Writer Philip Yancey notes that, in the modern United States, each year a million teenage girls become pregnant out of wedlock. We don’t think that much about it, unless of course, it is our daughter. Mary’s predicament was entirely different in a closely knit Jewish community in the first century. The news that Gabriel delivered could not have been entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress, subject to death by stoning. (5)

Did Mary know what she was getting herself into? Maybe not entirely. But that did not change her answer. She said “Yes” to God and the world has never since been the same.

The American Standard Version of the Bible translates Mary’s answer to the angel like this: “Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word.”

Though it doesn’t appear in more modern versions of the New Testament, this word “bondslave” is important. The scourge of slavery was common in New Testament times. Some slaves were captives taken in war. Many people were forced into slavery as a way to work off debts. But in some instances, a slave came to love his or her master and willingly choose to remain in slavery rather than go free. In those cases, the slave was declared a bondslave one who chose to serve out of love rather than obligation. This was how Mary saw her relationship to God. She would willingly give up her own agenda and submit herself to His will. (6)

No wonder God chose this humble maiden for the most important assignment anyone on earth has ever received. Suppose you loved God that much? Suppose I loved God that much? Three times in this portion of Scripture Luke uses the word “Blessed!” to describe Mary. It’s a strong word in Greek, conveying God’s gracious goodwill toward a person. No wonder so many people in this world revere Mary even today as “the blessed virgin.” She was a young woman of courage and conviction.

I understand that the name “Mary” is still one of the most popular names for females in the U. S. I am certain that this teenage girl long ago had something to do with that.

**Mary was blessed because she was obedient.** Do you want a blessing from God? Here is the secret be totally obedient to God’s will for your life and you will be blessed. Being blessed doesn’t mean your life will be easy.

Let’s use an analogy. Christmas is a blessed season, the most blessed season of the year. But it can still be a stressful time. In Philadelphia, the Old First Reformed Church, United Church of Christ, always has a Nativity scene with mannequins representing Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. But to liven up things, they use live animals. One year, the scene featured a couple of kids (baby goats). The kids were a big attraction, as they were lively and would sometimes climb up on the back of the cow and walk around. One night, however, they wrecked the Nativity scene the mannequins representing Joseph and Mary were toppled over, and some of the mannequins representing the shepherds even had their heads knocked off. The pastor of the church, Geneva M. Butz, surveyed the wreckage, then told a passerby, “Isn’t this how many of us feel on Christmas morning?” (7)

Maybe we do. Christmas is a blessed season, but that doesn’t mean there is not stress. Being blessed didn’t mean Mary’s life was easy. Far from it. Particularly thirty-three years later when she watched her son die on Calvary’s tree. Those of you who have adult children isn’t it your prayer that they will far outlive you? Is there any greater tragedy than to lose a child? Mary understood that pain because it happened to her. She watched her baby grow and becomes an amazing young man only to have his life snuffed out at the far too young age of thirty-three. Being blessed did not mean being trouble free. But it did mean that God was always with her. And friend, if you are obedient to God, God will always be with you.

Why are we in this place today? Because more than 2,000 years ago an angel appeared to a 13 or 14 year old girl, a virgin, in a remote part of the world, and made a most remarkable announcement to her: “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

And Mary answered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

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2. http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/first-mary-now-us-john-nadasi-sermon-on-salvation- 53331.asp.

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5. “Cosmic Combat: The Other Side of Christmas, Part 1, Christianity Today, 12/12/94.

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