

Nevertheless, Reality Changed (Luke 1:26-56)

Our Advent theme this year is “Expect the Unexpected,” which perfectly fits the situation of Mary, whose experience we just heard in the Scripture Kim read for us. When we hear that phrase, we might become a bit wary, like ancient mariners sailing into that portion of the chart that reads, “here there be dragons.” For the most part, we rarely get to the point of expecting the unexpected, or we’ve reduced it’s effect to “it might happen,” like when your team has to kick a field goal from 63 yards out to win the game. As a culture we’re willing to accept things within the realm of possibility—some more than others: it could happen, unlikely but possible.

That’s the story of progress in human history, isn’t it? Advancement occurred because someone, or a small group of someones had the audacity to think that their idea could actually succeed. When an idea like that does succeed, the realm of possibility expands inspiring others to think outside the box. Steve Jobs had a particular talent for that kind of thought. He considered outlandish ideas and devised ways of realizing them. Entire industries grew up around some of those ideas—reality changed despite the odds because someone said, Nevertheless, I think this could work. Human ingenuity continues to push the boundaries of possibility—it’s in our DNA—we are created in the image of a creative God. We are harnessing that creative spark in previously unimaginable ways.

Since we recognize the accomplishments of brilliant women and men who have, by ingenuity, expanded the boundaries of possibility, and if we accept the existence of God, why wouldn’t we also accept the premise that this incredibly creative God could and does interact with humankind in ways that exceed the bounds of what we might consider possible for the sake of a positive outcome this benevolent God desires to bring about?

This is precisely the dilemma that Mary wrestled with in the face of Gabriel’s announcement to her. She might not have framed it the way we would, but somewhere in her thought she must have wondered: of what is God capable? And how do I fit into that capability?

Mary found herself being drawn into what I will simply call a notable birth narrative. These were not unknown to the people of Israel. They were an infrequent but significant part of Israel’s faith history. Their very existence as a people group was founded on a notable birth story—the promise of Isaac to the aged Abraham. His equally aged wife Sarah had been barren and was well beyond child-bearing age. Yet she conceived and bore Isaac. The pattern continued with Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, also barren, until prayer opened her womb and she delivered Jacob and Esau. Again, Jacob’s wife Rachel was barren, but once more through prayer her womb was opened and she bore Joseph. These children, all born to previously barren women after divine intervention were notable leaders through whom the plan of God progressed. The special circumstances surrounding their conception bore witness to God’s hand at work establishing this people and moving them forward in God’s plan. Moses had his own notable birth narrative—not tied to conception, but to remarkable preservation and rescue. Again, a notable leader, arguably the most important in Hebrew history. Samson’s conception came about through divine intervention, announced by an angel to a sterile, childless wife. He was a notable, if terribly flawed leader who preserved Israel from Philistine conquest. Hannah was a barren wife who longed for a child and earnestly prayed for a son at the Lord’s Temple in Shiloh. The Lord answered her prayer and she gave birth to Samuel, a pivotal prophet in Israel’s history. The story repeated again, closer in time to Mary, when an aged priest named Zachariah, during his service in the Temple, was visited by the angel Gabriel who announced that his barren, aged wife, Elizabeth who bear a son who was to be named John who would be a pivotal figure in Israel as the forerunner to the Christ.

All of these notable birth narratives were a sign that God was on the move bringing about the plan providing humankind’s rescue from the captivity of sin that had corrupted God’s original design.

All of these involved people of faith in partnership with divine agency to bring about a shift in human history that moved God’s story forward. Yet remarkable as they individually were, they remained within the bounds of what was conceivable, though highly unlikely. The

heart of faith imagined the possibility that ordinary means would deliver an extra-ordinary outcome.

But Mary's situation was exponentially different from what had transpired in Israel's history marking her experience unique and unparalleled. Her faith history would have taught her that her son would be a notable figure in Israel, and, in time the means by which he would be conceived indicated that he himself was unique and without parallel. But at the moment of Gabriel's announcement, the prospect of it to her wouldn't have seemed merely unlikely, but impossible.

Typically, when we consider this event, we often pause here to reflect on Mary's state of mind—the jumble of emotions we imagine she might have felt, the prospects of how this changed her immediate plans, her confusion about how this might be given her virginity as though the mechanics of it were her primary concern. Obviously that's an important piece of it, but perhaps not in the way we've thought. It seems as though this would have been a perfect segue for Gabriel to quote Isaiah 7:14—“the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” But Gabriel didn't go there, and I've wondered, why not? That would have cleared things up considerably. As I pondered this, it occurred to me that the Isaiah passage isn't meant for Mary—it's meant for Israel, and later, of course, for us. It's a sign, hang on to that; we'll come back to this shortly.

When Mary ponders this, and asks her question: How will this be since I am a virgin? we have to assume that she is familiar with her faith history and the notable birth narratives within it. It seems she is given the content of her song that mirrors Hannah's song in I Samuel 2. I believe her question goes more to the sense of her lacking the ability to take her place in the line of notable birth narratives in Israel's history because she's not married. She realizes that she doesn't fit into the typical narrative paradigm. The conceptions in these historic birth narratives happen soon after the announcement, and she's not married yet; perhaps her and Joseph's plans for marriage don't fit the timeline she imagines necessary. So she's perplexed because of the timing—she doesn't have the means or situation to accomplish the outcome.

Right here is where Mary's story intersects with ours. We're gathered together today because we're people of faith—followers of Jesus. We're open to what God want to do and is doing in our world. Perhaps we're at the place where we recognize that God's MO is to work in partnership with people of faith; divine and human agency working in tandem to bring about God's plan. God's call on our life is not to give birth to the messiah, but to act in concert with the Spirit of Jesus to carry on the ministry and message of Jesus in our time. But as we hear that call, perhaps in the back of our mind we wrestle with something similar to Mary's thought: how will this be? I'm not capable, I'm not equipped, I'm not in the right situation to be used this way. We want God's plan to succeed, we just don't believe we've got what it takes to be the instrument God uses in a given situation.

So then, here is where we're called to listen to Gabriel. Without doing in much detail at all, the angel essentially says to Mary: God will provide, God will bring this about in you. Gabriel then offers the example of Elizabeth as a confirmation of how God works. She, barren all her life, now aged, nevertheless she is in her sixth month of pregnancy. In other words, see for yourself, and then the clincher: nothing is impossible with God.

Likewise, as you ponder God's call on your life to participate with God in the great restoration of creation: look around you, and see the evidence of how God is using ordinary people to bring about extra-ordinary outcomes. People of faith are stepping out in faith that God will provide whatever is needed for the particular way God is leading their heart. Outlandish as it may seem, beyond belief, nevertheless reality changes, differences are made for God will supply whatever you think you lack—nothing is impossible with God.

Gabriel's assurance was enough for Mary—her reply revealed her heart: I am the Lord's servant...may it be to me as you have said. Even so, Mary followed up on Gabriel's suggestion. She went to Elizabeth to see for herself, to get outside confirmation, and found it. In that moment Elizabeth affirms Mary's faith: Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished. Believe here indicating trust. The cycle that began with astonishment followed by confusion dispelled with a promise ended in confident trust evident

in Mary's song: my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, in other words, I am at rest in God's care and provision. I get to be an instrument in God's plan—God is on the move! Reality has changed, the world is made right again because God is faithful to promises made.

The sign of Isaiah 7 is for our benefit confirming that this child is the one in whom the world is made right again. This is the one through whom God works to bring about the plan of restoration. Jesus is the one upon whom it all depends.

The lessons we get from this are short, but decisive: 1) God is reliable; 2) God's might is unleashed to accomplish the purpose; 3) the great reversal has begun; 4) God's promise will be fulfilled: Nothing is impossible with God.

All of this moves forward in the world through people of faith acting in partnership with God. Can reality change? It already has and continues to do so through people who mirror Mary's response: I am the Lord's servant. Let us be those people. AMEN