

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:34-37)

Nothing is Impossible with God

Is every baby a miracle? We talk like they are and I understand why. Every time I held one of my children for the first the time, it was an incredible moment when you had to wonder at God’s work in giving you that child. In that sense, we rightly call them miracles. They are gifts of God’s grace. It’s a wonder that we get to hold them in our arms. But at the same time, more than 350,000 babies are born every day around the world. That means that since this time yesterday, almost 11,000 babies were born in the US, at least 300 of them right here in Michigan. And doctors generally understand how the physical process works. As much as every one of those babies is a gift from God, the true definition of a miracle is when God does something outside the normal laws of nature. Very few of the 350,000 babies born in the last 24 hours qualify.

But there have been real miracle births. Isaac was born when his mother 90 years old. Samuel and Samson were born to women who were physically incapable of having children. And, of course, in this Advent season, we can’t forget John the Baptist, born to Elisabeth after a lifetime of longing for a child but being unable to have one. All those miracle births lead up to the greatest one of all: that of Jesus. Today, we’re studying the words of the angel Gabriel when he came to Mary to announce what God was about to do. Naturally, she asked how it was possible. Gabriel gave her an answer that echoes back to the very dawn of creation and right up to today: **nothing is impossible with God.**

I.

It’s funny. In an age in which over 3000 babies are aborted every day, thousands of people every year have medical procedures to help them get pregnant. Sometimes, there’s a medical problem that keeps a couple from having children. Today many couples get married in their late twenties or early thirties. Often, they plan to wait several more years before they have children – then they run into tough biological realities. But one thing is constant in all their efforts to overcome medical issues and beat back the clock: they all assume a biological father and mother. That was true in all those miracle births in the Bible, too. God cured wombs that didn’t work and overcame the natural limits of age. But there was always a biological mother and father – except in the case of the last and greatest of all the miracle births in the Bible. **Nothing is impossible with God. Not even a virgin birth.**

God sent Gabriel to an unmarried virgin named Mary. She was probably quite young by our standards – maybe 15 or 16. He greeted her as one who was “highly favored.” God was about to give her one of the greatest gifts any woman would ever receive. She was going to be with child and give birth to a son who would be the promised Savior. That’s when Mary asked, **“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”** She understood that God was not promising her that she and Joseph would have a child after they got married. That’s when God gave one of the deepest statements in all of scripture: **“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.”**

Very simply, there was no biological father, at least not in the sense that we usually think of it, not even in the sense that there is one with modern artificial insemination. Instead, the Holy Spirit “came upon her.” What does that mean? I don’t know, except to say that he came to her to do something extraordinary, so that “the power of the Most High [overshadowed] her.” What does that mean? The Greek word literally means “to cast a shadow over” or “to cover.” Some ancient writers thought that this meant a cloud covered Mary when she actually gave birth to the Christ child. But I think it’s probably better to see this as God’s way of saying that Mary had nothing to do with it. This was totally an act of God. It was a onetime miracle that would never be repeated again. The Son of God was entering the world. Now, this is not when Jesus became God’s Son. He was that already. Jesus is eternal. He always existed. And yet, by a miracle that we can’t comprehend, somehow the Father gave birth to him before time began. This was different. God used the womb and the eggs of the Virgin Mary to send his Son into the world.

Why did he do that? To save us. God was willing to intervene in this world in a way that he never did before or after because rescuing us was such a priority to him. God did more than just break the laws of nature. He does that all the time. Again and again in the Bible, he does the impossible. And every pastor can tell you stories of things that can only be explained as God breaking the rules for the good of his people. But this was an even higher order than that because God did all this to intervene in his own justice. You see, God is holy and he hates sin. God himself has pronounced the verdict against all sin in this world. God can do nothing else but condemn sinners to die and go to hell. His own justice demands that. But his love demands that he find a way to save us. God had to satisfy all that he is – his justice and his mercy. So he sent his Son into the world to be perfect for us. That means that you and I can stand in his courtroom and claim that we have been perfect. God the Father sent his Son into this world to suffer hell and die because that's what sinners have to do. So in his courtroom, he can record that our punishment has been paid. It doesn't have to be paid again. All that began in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

II.

In 1955, a man named Crockett Johnson wrote a much loved children's book called *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. When Harold draws things with his purple crayon, they come true. So he creates a world of adventure in a whole series of books. It's a popular story because even children know that they can't enter the world they draw with their crayons, but it's fun to think of what might happen if you could. Even a great artist like Leonardo da Vinci couldn't make a world that was real, let alone a world he could enter. But God did make a real world. Then the Creator stepped into it. More than that, he became part of the world he made. Harold didn't do that. He didn't become a purple drawing. He just interacted with the things he drew. But God does more than we can imagine. **Nothing is impossible with God. Not even God becoming flesh.**

Gabriel said, **“The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”** Mary might have understood that differently than people would today. If I say that something is called something, I usually mean that's not really what it is, right? It's like getting a milkshake from McDonald's. If you look very carefully at their menu, it's never called a “milkshake.” It's called a “shake.” Using the word “milkshake” on their menu would open up too many discussions about what's really in it. But if somebody asked me, I might say, “You could call it a milkshake” and my point would be that maybe it really isn't.

That's not at all what Gabriel meant. In Jewish thought, names tell what something really is. Several times in the Old Testament, God changes people's names because the new name does a better job of describing who and what they are. A number of times, God speaks of the coming Messiah by saying that he would be called or named this or that. Each time, that told who Jesus would be or what he would be like. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed and said that he had revealed God's name to his disciples. He didn't mean that he told them a name they had never heard before. They were Jews. They knew God's name. He meant that he taught them to truly know God as he is. So when Gabriel said that Jesus would be called the Son of God, he was saying, “This is what he truly will be.”

But he would still be born because he still would be a real human child. This is the greatest of all mysteries. God pours himself into a human baby – a fetus in the womb and then a child that had to be wrapped in strips of cloth to keep out the cold. The mighty God had to be nursed and carried and cared for. If you think deeply about this, it's just mind blowing. It's easy for us to zip past this, because we hear it and confess it so often. But don't lose your sense of wonder at what God did. How much water can you put into a glass? It depends on how big the glass is, obviously, but it's eight or twelve or sixteen fluid ounces and no more. What if I stood in front of you and made a gallon fit inside an eight ounce glass? What if I made a whole pond fit there? What if I made an ocean fit inside it? It just can't be done. But God did exactly that. The Bible tells us that God fills the entire universe. The Bible tells us that God is everywhere all the time. And all that God is fit into that tiny baby, who existed in one place at one time. Jesus was true God, in every way equal to his Father. And he was true man, the real child of the Virgin Mary. How that can all be true is more than our human brains can understand. In fact, even in heaven, we may not understand this completely.

But just as important as who he was, is why he came to us in that way. The angel called him “the holy one to be born.” That is so different from what we are. We just can't be holy. We can't even be innocent. We are conceived and born in sin. We are corrupt from the moment we enter this world. We like to think that children, at least, as innocent, but that's just not the case. Anyone who has spent any time with them knows how selfish they are by nature. We adults were just as selfish when we were children. And the truth is, we're

just as selfish now. Our greatest sin is that we make ourselves our gods. So often, we do whatever we really want to do – even if God says don't, even if it hurts our spouse, even if it makes our temper or our lusts more important than our children. If you think you never do those things, either you don't really know what God commands or you have no self-awareness at all.

But Jesus was holy. He put his Father's will ahead of what was comfortable for him. He put us ahead of himself. So he lived for us. And then he died for us. And then he rose for us. Because he was a real human baby, because he had a human body and soul and a human mind and heart and will, just like we do, his holiness counts for us. God gives us credit because a real human being finally lived the way he commands us all to live. A real human suffered hell and died just like his justice demands. A real human being rose and opened the door to eternal life. Jesus had to be one of us to do all that for us.

And he had to be God so that it really counted for everyone. One human life could never make us all holy by itself. One human death could never pay for all the billions of people who will ever live. One human resurrection could not prop open the door to life for us all. So the Son of God lived that human life and died that human death and experienced that human resurrection. Since he is truly God, he is worth more than all our sin put together. So his payment counts for you and me. It makes us holy in God's sight.

All that is the miracle God did. It's a greater miracle than any other we will ever experience. To hold a newborn in your arms and wonder at the great works of God is truly an act of faith. To give him all the credit for that gift is the only appropriate response a Christian can offer. To recognize when he reaches into our lives and does things that should've been impossible is to acknowledge the love and working of our Creator. But as we approach the festival of Christmas, we see that even those great gifts of God are just tokens of the richer and greater gift he gave us two thousand years ago. They are just shadows of the greatest miracle our God will ever do. He did that miracle so that we will live with him. Only he could do it. Nothing is impossible with God. Not even entering his own creation. Not even breaking the rules of nature. Not even saving us and bringing us home. Amen.