

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "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."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Nothing is Impossible with God

Have you ever gotten into a stupid argument? When I was in 5th or 6th grade, my best friend lived next door and his family was active in their Baptist church. So we talked about religion sometimes. I don't remember how it started, but one time we got into an argument about God keeping us safe. I argued that if God wants you to be safe, you're gonna be safe no matter what else is going on. He argued that obviously, sometimes, you're more safe than other times. Being kids – and especially boys – he had an interesting example. He asked me, "So, if someone tied you up and put a hand grenade in your mouth and pulled the pin, you would be just as safe as anybody else?" To which I answered, "Yes, if God didn't want anything to happen to you." Looking back on it, I can only say that adolescent boys are really good at arguing about silly things and getting mad at each other. And, isn't the faith of a child a wonderful thing? As your pastor, I would still maintain that if God wants you to be safe, you are absolutely safe even if somebody ties you up and sticks a hand grenade in your mouth and pulls the pin. But as an adult who deals with the real world, I don't know how confident I would be of God's protection in that circumstance. But it is still true that if God wants you to be safe, you will be safe.

Now, that all might seem like it's a long way from the gospel lesson for this morning. And it is, in the sense that this lesson is not talking about the way that God takes care of us from day to day. But I thought of that silly argument that I had almost forty years ago because of what the angel said to Mary, and how true his statement is especially when it comes to Jesus coming to rescue us: **nothing is impossible with God.**

I.

While God taking care of us is never far from our thoughts, when the angel said these words to Mary, he was talking about Jesus. He was talking about all the obstacles God had to overcome to make his plan of salvation a reality. For us, they would be impossible barriers. And the first barrier was time. But it has no hold on God or his promises. **Nothing is impossible with God, not even keeping ancient promises.**

You've all heard this story before, right? Mary was a virgin who lived in Nazareth. She was engaged to Joseph, but they weren't married yet, so she and Joseph were not sleeping together. In that time and place, she was probably a teenager. And the angel Gabriel came to her with a very unusual greeting. He called her "highly favored." When Mary was troubled by that statement, the angel told her that she had found favor with God. Now that didn't mean she had earned God's favor. The word translated as "favor" is the word we usually translate as "grace." Grace means God's undeserved love. God was doing something amazing here for her and for us. God's doesn't do these miracles because we earn them. He does them simply because he loves us.

What was the favor or grace God was giving her? She would give birth to a son and name him Jesus. That Son would sit on the throne of his father David. He would reign over the house of Jacob forever. As you've heard me say over and over again for the last couple of months, God had promised King David a

descendant who would reign over his kingdom forever. The angel was saying that God was about to fulfill that promise. Now, you've heard me say that so many times that you might be getting a little bored with it. Let me apologize for being so repetitive. I wish I could be a more clever about how I say these things. But understand, part of the reason I'm being so repetitive is that God himself keeps making this point throughout the Old and New Testament scriptures. God never let his people forget his Old Testament promises so that when he kept them, they would realize what was happening.

God did more than that. He worked in history to make it clear that this was a miracle. Do you know how many years passed between King David and Mary? Almost a thousand. God knew that much time would pass when he gave the promise. Still he said it. What was our world like a thousand years ago? In 1017, the Western hemisphere was unknown to anyone but Native Americans. Most of our ancestors were probably serfs working on manor somewhere in Europe. And they worked from dawn til dusk desperately trying to bring in enough food to survive the winter. No one knew what germs were, so no one knew why people got sick and died. No one cared about civil rights. Most of our ancestors probably couldn't read or write. They lived short, difficult lives and then they died.

Could someone then have imagined that Donald Trump would be president of the United States? Or that a really nice smart phone might cost eight or nine hundred dollars? Or that North Korea would be trying to develop nuclear missiles to intimidate the US? It would've been impossible to imagine the world as we know it a thousand years ago, so it would've been almost impossible for anyone then to say anything about our world that would be even remotely accurate. Yet a thousand years before Jesus was born, God promised that he would come from the line of King David. God promised the Virgin Mary.

But it wasn't just time that made this so amazing. It's what happened in between those two events. When David's grandson became king, half his country revolted and the house of David never got those tribes back. They managed to hang on to the rest of the country for a few hundred years, but eventually they were conquered and deposed. By the time Gabriel spoke to Mary, no one from David's line had been king for almost six hundred years. Mary and Joseph, who was also from David's line, were poor. Joseph was a carpenter. And they weren't even in Bethlehem, the City of David anymore – where the baby was supposed to be born.

As if all that wasn't enough, it had been four hundred years since God had sent any prophet to remind them of his promises. Four centuries of silence must have made some people wonder if any of the ancient promises God had made could possibly still come true. But God hadn't forgotten them. God was patiently waiting for the time to be right. God was quietly moving all things into place, so that according to his timing and his plan, Jesus would be born. Then God sent an angel to tell Mary the waiting was over. In nine months, the promise would be kept. Only God could have even remembered a promise that old. Only God could have cared enough to make sure that his word did not fail. Only God could have known a thousand years beforehand what he was going to do and only he could have remained committed to his purpose for so long and then fulfilled it and all his ancient promises.

II.

God simply would not be denied. But reaching across ten centuries and more wasn't even the most impossible part about what he told Mary he was about to do. The far greater miracle was the birth itself. Mary immediately understood that the angel was promising something impossible. When the angel said, "**You will be with child and give birth to a son**" a question leaped into Mary's mind: "**How will this be since I am a virgin?**" But little things like biology and unchangeable natural laws don't really bother God. Like the angel said, **nothing is impossible with God, not even a virgin birth.**

This was not at all like our modern artificial insemination. I read this week about a woman who gave birth to a baby from an fertilized egg that was frozen for twenty-four years. But even there, there was a biological father who supplied what was needed to fertilize the egg. That didn't happen here. Joseph was going to be a step-father. God did a true miracle here. Gabriel said, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.**" You say this every time you confess in the Apostles' Creed, "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary." God simply reached into Mary and took a real human egg in her ovary and he created a complete human being from it and put it in her womb.

Not just any human being, but the human nature of Jesus. That means a sinless human being. The reason that you and I need a Savior is that we were born sinners. We inherit all kinds of things from our biological parents – our height, the color of our eyes, and the color of our hair. Some people argue that we

inherit a whole lot more, including important aspects of our personalities. But the single most important thing that we got from our parents is our sin. Even if we never met our biological fathers and mothers, we would know this much: they were sinners. Every human going all the way back to Adam was a sinner, except for Jesus. Mary was born a sinner, too. Part of this miracle is creating a sinless human nature. I won't speculate on how that worked. But it did.

Gabriel told Mary why God was going to do this, **“So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”** In the Jewish mind what you name something is what it really is. So Jesus really is the Son of God. This real human nature that God was going to create would be joined to the Son of God to make the person that we know as Jesus. So that baby whose birth we're going to celebrate tonight and tomorrow was a real human baby. He was a newborn whose human brain had to develop. That baby had to learn to walk and talk. He had to be carried by his parents. He had to be wrapped in strips of cloth to keep him warm and he had to be fed. He got tired and he had to sleep. And he grew, mentally and emotionally as well as physically. Because he was a real baby, born of the Virgin Mary. But at the same time, he was God. So he knew everything even while his human brain was growing and learning. He was in control of the whole universe, even while he was learning to walk and talk. He was everywhere all the time, even in heaven, while he was sleeping in that stable. That's who God promised to send.

Why? To save us. It's that simple. We human beings are sinners. I don't have to prove that to you. You prove it to yourself every single day. “Nobody's perfect.” As an excuse, that's worthless. But as a statement of eternal truth, it's undeniable. We all sin every day and we all deserve nothing but death and hell. But God sent a Savior, one of us, to be perfect in our place. Then to die, like we humans do. But he only sent one. So he had to be perfect and to pay for all of us, for all the billions of people who would ever live. He had to be so much more than a man for his life and death to count for everyone. He had to be God. So that's who God sent us. Because he did, all our sins are paid for and forgiven. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus mean that we are holy and perfect in God's sight.

Just to square the circle, that does take us back to my original story. Even if someone ties us up and stuffs a hand grenade in our mouths and pulls the pin, we are still safe in God's hands. God made a promise a thousand before this text was written and he kept it. God made a lot of other promises about Jesus' coming and he kept every single one of them. In both the Old and New Testaments, God makes a lot of other promises to us. He promises that Jesus will come back and take us home. He promises to work through the gospel and strengthen our faith. He promises to hear and answer every one of our prayers. He promises to be with us, to protect and care for us and to bring us home to heaven. He will keep everyone of those promises, too, because he kept that all important promise: Jesus came. He lived in our place. He died our death. He rose and we will rise and live with him forever. Trust in the Savior God worked so hard to give you. Amen.