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 Third Sunday of Advent

The Impossible
Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

27 *to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

28 *And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

29 *But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

30 *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*

31 *And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.*

32 *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 ancestor David.*

33 *He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

34 *Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*

35 *The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God.*

36 *And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.*

37 *For nothing will be impossible with God."*

38 *Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

In 2012 a movie came out about the horrific tsunami that hit southeast Asia on December 26, 2004.

Many of you remember how that disaster was one of the first times we made hygiene kits.

The movie is called ***The Impossible***, and the title is fitting.

It is the story of ***Maria Belon***, her husband, and their three young sons. They were enjoying a beachside vacation in Thailand that day. The boys were playing with their father in the resort pool, when a strange roar came, and then a ***30 foot wall of water*** washed away the entire resort, taking the family under and into a nightmarish journey of survival and reunion. Over 200,000 people in 11 countries died from the tsunami that day. They did not.

Maria and her 10 year old son Lucas were together, the father was with the younger ones, Thomas and Simon, but ***neither*** Maria or her husband believed that the other family members had survived. Maria was badly injured after spending several minutes submerged in water, and being carried along the current with dangerous debris.

The movie chronicles what it took for them to survive, and the twists and turns it took for the father to finally get the whole family ***reunited***. Because the film is so realistic, and it all really happened, it's one of the most ***scary and inspiring*** movies I've ever seen! Not for the faint of heart!

But the best part of that film was reading about ***its creation***, and the way the actors befriended the real family to make the film ***true to life***.

Listen to what ***Maria said*** about her ordeal:
*"[Before] I was always afraid of things.
 The tsunami was an incredible gift.
 I embrace life. My whole life is extra time."*

"I learned what real generosity was through the tsunami. People who didn't know me spent hours looking for my family". <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/real-story-behind-impossible-miracle>

It's ***not exactly*** what you would expect someone to say after having survived such a horrific disaster.
Or is it?

Aren't our ***blessings sometimes wrapped up in suffering*** and hardship?

I thought of her story and her words,
as I re-read the **Annunciation story** of Mary this week.

And I wondered, **what did Mary say** about her experience,
as she looked back over her life years later?
What did she say later, about being chosen to give birth in such a **scandalous**
way, out of wedlock, with a wild story about the conception?
What did she say later, about having to **give birth among the animals** in the
manger, **away from home**, in Bethlehem?

What did Mary say, as she looked back over her life,
after the death of her firstborn son Jesus on the cross?

Can you imagine what she **might have said**?
Can you imagine her saying it was worth it?
It was a **gift**,
even in the midst of great suffering?

Aren't some of our **greatest blessings wrapped up in suffering**?

And isn't it true that the whole story of Jesus **foreshadows the pain** that will
come with the blessings?

When the angel Gabriel comes to her and says,
"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."
Mary **does not say**—that's awesome! Fantastic!
The Bible says she was much **perplexed** by his words,
and **pondered** what sort of greeting this might be.
This is Bible-speak for **'what on earth is going on here?'**

Then the angel says to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God",
which is code for Mary was **shocked and scared**.

Then Gabriel proceeds to tell her that she is going to give birth to a son,
name him Jesus and he will be the Son of God!
Talk about **feeling overwhelmed**, just imagine what was going on in her head.

It wasn't lost on her that this 'great news' was wrapped up in a **life-changing, scandalous, scary path** ahead.

When we read the story today,
we've heard it so many times that we've **lost the shock of it all**.
This is **great news when we** read it,
but imagine how it was interpreted by a poor, young unwed teenager,
just minding her own business one day?

Imagine her confusion—**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**
How will I tell my **parents**?
And what is **Joseph** going to say?
How quickly will he **disown** me?
How fast will they act to **stone** me to death for this?

Mary was **probably thinking** what any of us would--
What? Am I dreaming? Am I seeing things! God is—here with me?
Am I losing my mind?

When she learns that this great announcement means
the end of her life as she knew it, she probably was more than a little afraid.
It was great news, **just not the greatest news** for her at that moment.
(Boy, when have you felt that?)

That's why I think it **takes her awhile** to welcome the announcement.
Have you ever noticed that in this story?

It's only **after Gabriel explains** how this is going to happen,
Only **after** he tells her about **Elizabeth's** miraculous pregnancy in her old age,
Only **after** he says *Nothing will be impossible with God...*
Only then does Mary accept the news, and say:
"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her.

Sometimes the **greatest blessings** are wrapped
in the **greatest scandal and suffering** in our lives, aren't they?

When in your life have you been ***blessed by the very thing*** that brought you great pain? I know of many painful blessings in my life, especially looking back. Things that made me who I am today. Can you think of yours?

For Mary, it ***wasn't just this*** shocking announcement that told her the path would be difficult.

There were ***signs each step*** of the way.....

When there was no room in Bethlehem, just a ***manger*** where she gave birth.

When it was ***lowly shepherds*** who came to share their visions of the heavenly hosts...

And then there was this warning from a man named named ***Simeon***, who was there when they brought the child Jesus to the temple for sacrifice.

In Luke 2:22-36 it says that Simeon was a righteous and devout man, ... and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

26 *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.*

27 *Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,*

28 *Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,*

29 *"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ***30*** for my eyes have seen your salvation,*

31 *which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

32 *a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."*

33 *And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ***34*** Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary,*

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed

35 *so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed— and a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

And a ***sword will pierce*** your own soul, too.

What swords have pierced ***your soul***,

What ***blessings*** have caused you pain?

What ***pain*** has brought you blessing?

We have a ***lot to learn from Mary***.

These verses today are known as the ***Annunciation***—the announcement.

In most of our Christmas pageants these are incorporated into the nativity story, but this particular story has ***a lot to teach us***.
Not all Christians agree on Mary's power or position.

The ***Roman Catholic church*** has long venerated Mary as the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of God.

The prayer of the rosary comes from the first chapter of Luke:

Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death Amen.

The ***Eastern Orthodox Church*** has also venerated Mary, as the ***Theotokos***, the God-bearer, with similar prayers to her, and for her intercession.

Protestants like us have all too often ***ignored*** Mary, or considered her a nice ***passive*** woman, chosen by God, a woman who faithfully agreed to her calling.

I don't think we have given her enough attention,
 Because the truth is,
 Mary is a ***prophet***—called like other prophets such as Isaiah or Ezekiel.
 She is a ***leader***, called like other leaders in the Bible, like Moses.
 And she is the ***mother of Jesus***, our Savior.

And just like many other saints in the Scriptures,
 she is also an ***ordinary person***.
 In fact, Mary's praise song, the ***Magnificat*** in Luke 1:46-55,
 reminds us that Mary was ***just a poor, lowly unwed teenage girl***.
 There was nothing supernatural about her,
 Nothing special.
 Except her ***willingness*** to listen to God,
 and despite the shock and surprise,
 her willingness to ***trust and obey*** this strange and awesome call upon her life.

I wonder, isn't Mary really the ***first disciple of her Son***, our Savior Jesus?
 Her entire life is changed by his conception and birth,
 and she devotes her entire life to Him—from his birth to his death.

Isn't she an *example for all of us*?

Doesn't God call each and every one of us *to do some hard things*?

Some *surprising* things?

Some *difficult* things?

When has God *completely interrupted* your life?

When have you been *shocked* by what God is asking you to do?

Ever said, that's just *IMPOSSIBLE*?

I've always been moved by those words of Luke 1:37:

For nothing will be impossible with God.

Nothing.

Nothing.

What do you do when something you are facing seems impossible?

Over the years, I have *written down* some impossible things,

and stuck the little pieces of paper into my Bible.

All of them *seemed impossible*. It's a good idea to try.

Some of them *were answered* in ways that I could never, ever imagine.

One of them I saw this week while at a Bible study,

and we're going on six years of daily asking for that prayer to be answered.

It *seems impossible*.

But then we have God's word, and God's promise:

For nothing will be impossible with God. So we keep on believing, right?

Mary's story is so powerful, because it's *OUR story* too.

All of us.

We all *have God interrupt* our lives, at one time or another,

And we are asked to be brave...to walk through valley,

To trust and obey,

and all we have is God's promise that

For nothing will be impossible with God.

It reminds me of *Romans 8:18*, where it says;

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us.

Did you know that some translations say ‘revealed ***in us***’?

The Greek can mean both,

And the most common translation for eis is ‘***into us***’.

The present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory revealed ***into us***.

That was true of Mary for sure—

the glory of God was revealed ***to her***,

in her own life,

and ***through her***, in the birth of Jesus.

What if that’s true of ***US***?

Paul has other wise words in ***2 Corinthians 4:7-10***:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

8 *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* ***9*** *persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

10 *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

And in Romans 5:3 Paul reminds us that:

we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

4 *and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,*

5 *and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.*

What if the ***interruptions*** of God, and the ***challenges*** we face,

the calls we are asked to respond to,

what if, they ultimately lead to ***hope***?

And what if ***God wants to do miracles*** in our lives, just as was true for Mary?

What if God wants to SHOW us that Nothing will be impossible with God?

There’s a great quote of theologian A.W. Tozer:

“Anything God has ever done, he can do now.

Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here.

Anything God has ever done for anyone, he can do for you.”

***I believe that my friends, I believe that.
Do you?***

Isn't that the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today?
God continues to break into our lives, just as he did with Mary.
God continues to call us in surprising and difficult ways, just like Mary.
God asks us to trust, to follow, to obey,
Even when the way seems filled with suffering, and sorrow....
And it might even appear that hope is lost,
For Nothing will be Impossible with God.
When we know that, we can say with Mary, Here I am, let it be with me
according to your Word...

That's a Christmas message, isn't it?
To that, all God's people said, Amen.