God of the Impossible

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Luke 1:25-38

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A few years ago, we challenged you to write your personal story using 100 words or less. Why 100 words? Because some faith stories are just too long. The discipline of writing a 100-word testimony makes it possible to share what has happened to you in a brief, compelling manner. It also allows people to ask follow-up questions if they want to know more instead of burying them under an avalanche of words.

Some of you don’t even attempt to write your story, thinking you don’t have a dramatic conversion story to share. People need to know that faith can sometimes be a gradual, evolving process. Your story doesn’t have to be sudden and instantaneous for it to be effective.

How would you tell this Christmas story from Luke’s gospel in 100 words? Here goes: God sent Gabriel to a young teenager named Mary. This angel tells Mary that she will give birth to a son without benefit of a human father. This son born to her will be the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus represents God’s plan to save the world.

That’s a total of 46 words! When you hear the Christmas story stated this simply, it seems so implausible. The main story line seems preposterous: a young peasant girl from a no-name village marries nobody special and gives birth to the Savior of the world. Nobody could have made this story up.
Last Sunday, we introduced Luke’s gospel with another improbable conception story. Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are well beyond childbearing years, are promised the gift of a son to prepare people for the coming Messiah.

The angel Gabriel plays a critical role in delivering these twin birth announcements. The Bible identifies only two angels by name and Gabriel happens to be one of them (the other one being Michael). Just to set the record straight: some angels sport wings while others resemble ordinary people, much like a plainclothes police officer.

God sends Gabriel to a small town called Nazareth. We’re talking a really small town, perhaps 150 residents in all, most of whom are somehow related to each other. This town is so obscure that it is never mentioned in the Old Testament.

“God sends Gabriel…to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (1:26-28). Virgin is a code word in Scripture for a young, unmarried woman. As near as we can tell, Mary is about 15 when this encounter with Gabriel occurs.

Mary is engaged to Joseph who, Luke tells us, is a direct descendent of King David. We don’t know much about Joseph. He works as a common tradesman, making his living as a carpenter.
Their respective families have already signed the marriage contract called the Ketubah. This document legally obligates them to marry. It was customary in those days to sign the marriage contract and take up residence together a year later. This explains why they are legally married but have not yet consummated their union.

Mary and Joseph are poor peasant people. We read in Luke 2 that when it comes time for them to dedicate their baby at the temple, they lack the requisite funds to buy a lamb used in the sacrifice. The law permits poor people to buy two turtledoves as an acceptable substitute (Luke 2:24).

Gabriel introduces himself to Mary with the words, “Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you” (1:28). Those of you of Catholic background will recall the liturgical prayer, “Hail Mary, full of grace and truth” that originates from Gabriel’s greeting. Others of you will equate “Hail Mary” with a desperation pass thrown at the end of a football game.

There is a division in the house among Protestants and Catholics regarding the meaning of this angelic greeting. Catholics contend there is something virtuous in Mary that warrants God’s favor. Protestants believe the favor is largely on God’s side. At the very least, God recognizes something in Mary that He can work with.

Luke tells us, “Mary was greatly troubled at the angel’s words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be”
Gabriel continues, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and you are to call him Jesus [Jesus represents the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua meaning, He will save]. 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” (1:30-33).

Mary asks, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” (1:34). In last Sunday’s story, when Gabriel tells Zechariah his elderly wife will have a son, he asks, “How can I be sure?” Zechariah wants proof. Show me a sign. Mary does not ask for a sign. She simply wants to understand. She could have protested that Gabriel has called on the wrong Mary. She offers no such resistance—just help me understand.

Gabriel obliges her request, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35). Gabriel’s explanation seems rather incomplete. Essentially, what Gabriel tells Mary is that God will make it happen. His final words makes all the difference, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37).

Impossible is a compound English word consisting of the prefix “im” added to the root word “possible.” Literally, the sentence reads, “Nothing is not possible with God.” We call this sentence in English grammar a double negative. Two negatives in English serve to cancel each other out and create a positive. The verse essentially reads, “Everything is possible with God.”
People ask me whether I believe in the virgin birth. I fall back on Gabriel’s words, “Everything is possible with God.” God can make it happen. A young, unwed teenager and an elderly woman conceive because God makes it happen.

What Mary says next goes down in the annals of biblical history as one of the most faith-filled declarations ever spoken: “Let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). Earlier, Mary asked, “How will this be?” Now she answers, “Let it be.” Mary is willing to trust God when the circumstances of her life don’t make sense. She is willing to participate in God’s plan even if it involves uncertainty and ridicule.

If you don’t think tongues are wagging in Nazareth when word gets out that Mary is pregnant and Joseph is not the father, you don’t know small towns. To quote an ’80s song by John Mellencamp, “I was born in a small town.” I can personally attest that everybody knows everybody’s business in a small town.

Henry Tanner was the first African-American to achieve international fame as an artist. He rose to prominence several decades after the Civil War, when there was considerable opposition to artists of color. Tanner was also a committed Christian who taught Sunday school at his local church. He often painted Biblical scenes. When asked why he painted biblical scenes, he said, “I preach with my brush.”

One of his well-known paintings debuted in Paris in 1898. It created quite a sensation since nothing in the painting reminded people of the revered subject in question.
Tanner did not portray her with a halo or other holy attributes. If it were not for the title, *The Annunciation*, she may have been mistaken for any number of people.

Tanner paints an ordinary domestic scene—rumpled bed sheets, an ordinary clay pot on a shelf and cracked plaster on the walls. Tanner portrays Gabriel as a single shaft of light.

Let’s zoom in on Mary. She is clothed in simple peasant dress. Her head tilts to one side, as if to convey, “I’m listening. You have my attention.” I appreciate Tanner’s eye for realism. I am convinced Tanner got it right. Mary is listening intently.

In a 1532 sermon, Martin Luther preached that three miracles happen in the Christmas story. The first miracle is that God becomes human. The second miracle is the virgin birth. The third miracle is that Mary believed. Luther said the last miracle was not the least among the three. That Mary should have faith to believe God’s mystery will be accomplished in her is no small feat. She held fast to the angel’s word.

Gabriel’s pronouncement that “Nothing is impossible with God” sets the whole tone for Luke’s gospel. Later in Luke, Jesus says “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (18:27).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?
Something in us wants to believe that nothing is impossible with God. We really want to believe, yet we have become cynical and jaded. We feel as though God has let us down somehow. We prayed for something but it did not happen in the manner for which we prayed. We prayed for someone to be healed but the person in question failed to improve. We prayed for relationships to reconcile but nothing changed. It left us feeling disillusioned and unwilling to trust God this much again.

Can we believe again? Can we believe, like Mary, that God can be trusted even when the circumstances of our lives don’t make sense?

Every year, I preach from this same Christmas story. Mary’s moxie, her deep faith and unwavering trust in God’s possibilities stirs me deeply. Can we believe again? Can we trust Christ again?

God does not select Mary for this mission impossible because of any great ability she brings to the table. God does not ask for her ability. He asks for her availability.

The very ordinariness of the people in the Christmas story never ceases to amaze me. I will talk more about this improbable story on Christmas Eve. There are no high rollers or beautiful people in this story. There are no movers or shakers to make things happen. Their exceptional abilities do not turn the world upside down for Jesus Christ. Their availability to do God’s bidding makes all the difference.

God does not ask for our great ability. He asks for our availability.