

Responding rightly to God's IMPOSSIBLE plans

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Date: 06 December 2020

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[0 : 00] Let me add my welcome to Andrews. It's great to see you again. Great for us to be together where we belong in church. It's good to be here. I don't know if you realized this when Alison was reading that New Testament passage, but today's passage is actually the same as last week's story.

On the surface, they don't look the same, but in both stories, the angel Gabriel meets a sort of starstruck person and tells them of God's plans for their lives.

Last week, there was Zechariah, and we're going to be comparing him today to pregnant Mary. It's not going to be easy for him. I mean, she is actually pregnant with Jesus.

She is the darling of the Catholic faith. They even praise her as though she was divine. Let's spare a thought for the old man Zechariah. But then let's spare a thought for men in here as well.

It's not easy for any man to relate to a pregnant lady. When Rachel and I think back to that time in our lives, I often utter the phrase, you know, when we were pregnant.

[1 : 09] That's a pretty cheeky thing to say, isn't it? Because only she was. The dads out there, do you remember when your kids were born? I'm sure you never forget it. Was there ever a time in your life you felt completely hopeless and helpless?

You're doing great, honey. Just keep pushing. I mean, it's quite ridiculous, isn't it? Although, am I correct in saying that for some of you, there was a time when dads weren't even allowed in the labor wards, and they used to wait by the phone or by the bar at the local pub. Is that the case?

I think it is the case. It's hard for men to properly relate to pregnant Mary in this story. But actually, it's going to be hard for the women to relate to her as well.

Because regardless of how special our bundles of joy were, none of us ever gave birth to God's king. If my birds and the bees are still correct, all our pregnancies required a mummy and a daddy.

But of course, Mary did the job on her own. Depending on how you count things, Jesus' fathers were Joseph and David and God himself. But he only ever had one mum.

[2 : 22] Mary is special. Every way you look at it, whether you're a man or a woman, she is unique. It's going to be hard to relate to her giving birth to the Messiah.

That's just not the business any of us are in. And so this passage today, it might simply be Luke giving us the facts and figures about how Jesus came to be.

He wrote an orderly account, remember? But I think we can do better than that. You see, I think Luke has put Zechariah and Mary alongside one another in chapter 1.

The idea is that we compare and contrast them. You see, Luke is going to teach us how to respond rightly to the impossible plans of God.

So for Mary, in her story, there's an unexpected visit, an unbelievable announcement and an impossible situation. And maybe if she was really a God, she would give herself a nice, quiet, at-home pregnancy.

[3 : 26] But will she trust God's ways, even when they're not her own? Will she trust in God's timing? Will she take God at his word? Will she accept the future he has planned for her?

See, these are the same things that we need to grapple with when we encounter God in our lives as well. Mary is Jesus' mother, but we are the brothers and sisters.

And in that way, we're all the same. We're all Jesus' family. And so Luke wants us to keep our eyes on Mary today. Luke is going to use Mary to teach us how to respond to God's plans, especially when they seem impossible.

So firstly, there's an unexpected visit when Mary meets the angel Gabriel. And I suppose I've probably watched too much TV in my life, but when I think of angels, you think of, you know, the fat, chubby babies playing harps or beautiful Scandinavian people in white pajamas.

Do you do that? Maybe that's just me. But in the New Testament, angels are scary creatures. In fact, every time they turn up, they have to first calm the people down.

[4 : 44] In verse 30, the angel says to Mary, do not be afraid. See, Mary lives in the real world where scary angels don't just pop in for a cup of tea.

And twice she's told, verse 28, verse 30, that she is favored by God. And that is confusing to her because there's nothing special about her, nothing that she has done which should attract God's attention.

What's more, she's from Nazareth, Nazareth, a town in Galilee. That's a very non-special place. It's all unexpected. But what comes next is unbelievable.

Have a look at verse 31. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. 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. You see, God's present at Christmas time is a king.

[5 : 53] And maybe after, you know, COVID in Victoria and the elections in the US, the idea of another leader is just quite, you know, exhausting. For Mary and Israel back then, they were exhausted by their leaders.

They were under Roman occupation. The Jews, the Jewish hierarchy were corrupt and ungodly. But they still held out hope. They held out hope as impossible as it seems that God would send a savior.

And Gabriel says to Mary that now is the time. The clue is in his name. Verse 31. You are to call him Jesus, which means God saves.

He says the Lord God will give Jesus the throne of his father, David. That is the great monarchy of his people, of Israel. It's a fulfillment of a thousand year old promise that God made in our first reading, which Eileen read for us.

Mary has clearly married into the right family. Verse 33. And Jesus will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

[7 : 06] I don't know how you feel about a never ending kingdom. I suppose it depends on the leader, doesn't it? So think of the queen. I'm quite a fan of the queen. I think she's pretty terrific. Terrific. She's ruled for 68 years and 10 months exactly to the day.

You can find that out on the Internet. But across the Pacific in the US, things have gotten a bit messy. One king has been shown the door. A new king is about to take over.

Who knows if he will be any different? When we think of human leaders, the idea of a forever king sounds a bit jarring. We're happy for term limits and mandatory elections.

But did you notice what is different about Jesus? Verse 32. He will be great. He will be called the son of the most high.

See, back in the ancient world, leaders would call themselves the son of the gods as a way to make themselves seem better than they were. But God says that Jesus is already great in his eyes.

[8 : 11] And unlike all other human leaders, he has all the goodness and perfection of his father, the most high. And I think the idea is that we are to watch Jesus in action on the pages of Luke's gospel and ask ourselves, is this a kingdom?

We want to keep going forever and ever. Is this a king that I could follow for myself? And all of that is just one cup of tea with Mary and this angel.

It's quite an unbelievable announcement. It's hard for her to grasp that in one conversation. And so verse 34. How will this be? Mary asked the angel.

Since I am a virgin. Years ago when I was an accountant, I had a colleague called Ben. And I used to try and evangelize Ben every day. But on paper, there was loads about Ben's personal life that seemed to be a barrier for him becoming a Christian.

But one day we had a conversation about it. And the sticking point for him was a virgin birth. He couldn't get his head around it. You see, Ben lives in the real world where virgins can't conceive.

[9 : 25] Are you sure, Vijay? I remember he asked me. But Mary lives in the real world too. She's not ignorant about human biology. She recognizes her virgin status.

When she says, how will this be? I think she's just saying that, yeah, it's impossible for her on her own. And that God will have to step in and solve it.

And so look at what God does to overcome this. Verse 35. The angel answered. The Holy Spirit will come on 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. It sounds unexpected and unbelievable. But if God was actually coming to earth, can you think of a better way to get our attention than to bend the ordinary laws of human reproduction?

To make a statement? I think that is the point. And as a proof, verse 36. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age.

[10 : 31] And Elizabeth, who was said to be unable to conceive, is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail. Literally translated, nothing will be impossible with God.

And I want you to watch Mary's reaction. Verse 38. I am the Lord's servant. Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled.

In response to two impossible pregnancies, Mary trusts God's word. In fact, she believes him so much that, verse 39, she got ready, hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth.

She took God at his word. She was convinced that despite her age, Elizabeth would be pregnant. Mary trusted, verse 37, that no word from God would ever fail.

And it's not that she's ignorant about human biology. She lives in the real world where old women and virgins can't conceive. But Mary is happy to let God be God and leave the impossible things to him.

[11 : 41] In fact, Mary's response is so good that she is commended by the Holy Spirit. Verse 45. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises, his word to her.

And our author has lined up the story of Mary with the story of Zechariah side by side. He has brought us to this point in the story where we would compare and contrast them.

And I wonder if you realize how many things were the same in both stories. In both stories, the angel Gabriel visits. There's two unbelievable announcements, two Old Testament prophecies fulfilled, two Old Testament heroes reborn, two impossibly pregnant women, and two incredibly special babies, John the Baptist and Jesus.

When we compare the stories, they're almost identical. The key lies in the contrast. The contrast of how Mary and Zechariah respond to God's word.

For Zechariah last week, when the angel told him that his wife was going to have a baby, he said, verse 18. I'm not sure if you can see it. He said, how can I be sure of this?

[12 : 54] And that is just like my colleague Ben's response to me. Are you sure, Vijay? See, Zechariah is overawed by the biology.

He doubts God can do what he said. He wants more proof, which I think is pretty rich, given that he's actually talking to an angel. And the verdict on him last week was verse 20.

Just listen to this. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens. Why? Because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.

But for Mary, verse 45. Blessed is she who has believed what the Lord has said. And even though that is the verdict for Mary, that can also be the verdict for us as well.

Because it's no less hard for us to trust in God's plans for our lives. For starters, God's ways are not our ways. Perhaps you thought once in your life that God was opening a door for you.

[14 : 02] Perhaps the door seemed perfect for your life and your circumstances, only for the door to be closed a short time after. Does the likelihood of your prayers being answered seem impossible?

God's timing is not our timing. Remember last week, Andrew said that God hadn't spoken for 400 years before this passage.

How many years have you been waiting for God to deliver on something you've been praying and praying for? Perhaps the impossible things aren't the problem for you. Perhaps you're happy to let God sort out that sort of stuff.

But it's just trusting that his ways are good. Especially when bad things like COVID seem to keep happening. We're all in church wearing masks. It's ridiculous. And maybe if you were God, maybe if we were God, we would organize the universe differently.

But you see, letting God be God, or sorry, not letting God be God, is the root of sin, isn't it? It's the idea that he's not doing a good enough job and we need to step in and take over.

[15 : 09] But our passage says that he already has a king. And a defining issue when Jesus turns up will be whether we have trusted in his word.

Whether we're happy to let Jesus be God and king in our lives. Because when he arrives, he will redefine what we think is possible and impossible.

Because he'll defeat the temptation of the devil. He'll heal sicknesses. He'll chase away evil. He'll even bring people back from the dead. Impossible, the skeptics will say.

But it's more than miracles they're going to have to deal with. Because he's also God's king. And there are protocols for meeting royalty, aren't there?

This week, my small group and I, we were discussing the do's and don'ts of meeting the queen. Do speak when you're spoken to. Do bow when you meet. Don't ask questions about Charles and Camilla.

[16 : 08] Don't do what every leader does. Put your hand on her back. She hates it when you do that. We can't meet royalty on our terms. Even more so for the forever king.

The people back then, they were preparing for his arrival. We are preparing for his return. But in both cases, we need to know the right protocols.

We need to know what God thinks is the right way to meet his son. And his word to us today is be humble like Mary.

Verse 38, I am the Lord's servant. It's to trust God's word like Mary did. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promise to her.

And that all might sound quite tough to you. God's ways are not our ways. As I'm sure you found out in your own lives. It will take humility to submit to Jesus.

[17:08] To trust his word and rule. Especially when it seems impossible. And so I think that's why the author finishes with Mary's song at the end.

I think Mary's song, it's a flourish about her impossible God and the things he has done. It gives you the reasons why God is the one you can submit to joyfully, confidently, trusting in his word.

What I'm going to do is read out. It's called the Magnificat. But I'm going to read out Mary's song at the end. What I want you to do is listen out for how God looks after people like Mary.

People who follow her example. Listen out. It's verse 46. Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed. For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

[18:11] His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arms. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Just as he promised our ancestors. You see, being Jesus' mother, that is unique to Mary. All generations call her blessed.

But letting God be God. Something we all can do. That is blessed as well. Lots of people don't want Jesus to be God.

They don't want to be led by him. And so will we be different? Will we be like Mary? Verse 38. I am the Lord's servant. Will we take him at his word?

[19:15] Like verse 45. And believe that the Lord can fulfill his promise to us. Even when his ways aren't ours. And especially when things seem impossible.

As we go forward in Luke's gospel. A defining feature of the kingdom. Is whether we're happy to let God be God. Take Jesus at his word.

Let me pray that we would do that. Father God, we thank you for Mary. For the example she has given to us. Please Father, would we be humble like Mary?

Would we take you? Would we take the Lord Jesus at your word? Please Father, would we approach your king this way? And we'll be long to be part of his kingdom.

A kingdom that has no end. Please help us when things in our lives seem impossible. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.