

Sermon Luke 1:26-38
First UCC Northfield
Pastor Lauren Baske Davis
12.5.21

LBD 1

Scripture - Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

Sermon

As I mentioned in The Chronicle this week, our Advent theme, "The Questions of Christmas," continues into its second week today! We hope, as we engage questions in this season, that you'll see we take the Bible seriously but not literally, and that questions are one of the ways we enter in to faith. Questions mean that we take something seriously enough to wonder deeply about it. We may not always have answers, but as a community, we journey together through the questions.

Last week, Pastor Cindy kicked off our series, preaching about Zechariah and his question to the angel Gabriel, which was, "How will I know?" This week, the angel Gabriel returns, but this time, to Mary, who learns that she's going to be a parent--of God's child. Mary asks, "How can this be?" It's really more of a logistical question that she asks, and the angel fills Mary in on the specifics.

How can it be that Mary, a virgin, will have a child? How can Elizabeth an older person, Mary's cousin and Zechariah's wife, be pregnant? How can it be that an angel kept visiting people in the same small area of the world? These are questions that are great, and people have wondered and guessed at answers for them for thousands of years. *And* in truth, they're rather logistical, technical questions. And if we *only* focus on questions like that, they may distract us from the deeper questions at hand. Which is why Mary's words, "how can this be?!" have captivated me in a wider sense.

When we step back and take in the whole story into account, there are so many times that we could ask, on a deeper level, "how can this be?" For example, how can it be that what the world needed in all of its troubles and struggles was a baby, born to peasants, under an oppressive empire? How can it be that Joseph stayed with Mary? How can it be that Mary said "yes, God, let's do this?" How can it be that this story is still so alive that we keep coming back to it each year?

Let's take Joseph for a moment. We know so little about him, other than that he was a carpenter by trade. And at the same time we get personal and profound details about his dreams. How can it be that we know about Joseph's dreams? At the same time, thank goodness

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we do, because it's Joseph's dreams that will lead the way and propel the action of the story forward in some respects. Joseph takes his dreams so seriously that he lets them guide his waking actions. He and Mary lived in a time and place that found it appropriate for townsfolk to stone unmarried pregnant women. How was it that he put himself on the line, and at such risk, to commit himself to a woman to whom he wasn't yet married? He could have walked away. It's such a compassionate and precarious thing that he does, staying with Mary. Instead of walking away, Joseph decided not to shun Mary but to marry her anyway. Together, a while later, a dream leads them to leave their home and seek refuge in Egypt to escape Herod and the murder of the innocents. Then a dream guides them back home. Joseph listened to whispers and little notions—imagine the kind of listening that takes. At the whisper of a dream, Joseph put his whole life on the line to honor his betrothal and take dangerous risks to protect his family. How can this be?

Now, onto Mary. This is the big one. How can it be that Mary, a young woman with little power, in a brutal empire, living in a patriarchy, is singled out and lifted up for who she is, just being herself? After getting over the fright of an angel in her home, scripture tells us that Mary pondered the angel's words. She wondered, considered. Multiple times in scripture, we hear about Mary pondering things. So it's not a big stretch to imagine that Mary pondered more than simply the logistics of how she'd be the mother of God's child.

Now, we typically see images of Mary in this season and through thousands of years of tradition. She's painted as pure, innocent, holier than your average Jane. But the angel doesn't say any of that. He just says she's favored. Nothing says she's virtuous or pure, innocent or even particularly wonderful. We don't really know anything about her.

Preacher Sam Wells says that all we really know is that the angel tells Mary she has found favor with God. Did God find favor with her because she was full of grace? Or was she full of grace *because* God found favor with her? We don't really know the order of things or what that even means.¹

Preacher Debbie Thomas says that, "Part of the problem is that we've buried [Mary] under so many layers of theology, piety, and politics, she's nearly impossible to excavate. Some of us pray to her. Others ignore her on principle. Some call her a victim of divine coercion. Others, 'Theotokos,' the Mother of God. For some, she represents a troubling model of pious femininity — ever sinless, ever virgin, ever mother. For still others, she is child prophet extraordinaire — a young girl who fearlessly announced the arrival of God... to earth."²

What we hear about Mary in our actual scriptures through is that she ponders things. It's written about her more than once, that Mary ponders things. Maybe that means that *she's*

¹ Rev. Sam Wells in conversation with Rev. Sally Hitchiner on Facebook through HeartEdge Facebook page, Sermon Prep for December 15, 2020 on the RCL Readings for Sunday, covering 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Romans 16:25-27 and Luke 1:26-38 <https://www.facebook.com/theHeartEdge/videos/1606415402864314>.

² Debbie Thomas, "The Pause Before Yes," Posted For Sunday December 21, 2014, Journey With Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church since 2004, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20141215JJ.shtml> accessed 11.29.2021

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open enough to live into the questions of it all. Maybe it means that she was open enough to believe in the ridiculous and the seemingly impossible —to not just believe it, but to live into it.

We see Mary trusts, and we see that while people have called her obedient, I think of her more like this:



This is a copy of a linocut by artist [Ben Wildflower](#). Fist in the air, defiant against the reigning empires, the words of the Magnificat (the song about the worldly powers being flipped on their heads) surrounding Mary like an aura. They read, “Cast down the mighty, send the rich away, fill the hungry, lift the lowly.” It’s a version of Mary that to me says, “yeah, God, let’s do this!”

In just a short while in the scripture, Mary will sing the Magnificat. That’s what this art is depicting. Lest we wonder where Jesus got his temple-table-flipping from, perhaps we consider Mary’s words in the Magnificat: faithful, feisty, and downright dangerous to the unjust and cruel powers that be. It’s not hard to imagine Mary singing lullabies to baby Jesus in his cradle about empires falling and the poor coming first, receiving not cast offs but the best of the best. Mary raises that little baby to be the man Jesus we know in the gospels. Which is to say, where did that *come from*? How can that be? And what if it all began with Mary’s pondering, her curiosity? What if this pondering curiosity was all that God needed to change the world?

And what about us? How can it be that we still revisit this scripture thousands of years later, knowing that the story we tell today probably isn’t exactly how it happened? How can it be that it still carries truth for us? How can it be that there’s still so much to discover in it? That it’s still prophetic? How is it that we are still here, willing to trust (or at least engage with) a story that is somehow true despite culture and time and so many years? How can it be that we are still drawn into it, captured by these various people in the story, each of whom plays a part?

Friends, in the end, I’m left with one last question: why not? How *can’t* it be this way? What if it is as simple as God conceiving some seemingly impossible and wonderful ideas, and then us being open to letting them become realities through us?

Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart said that God is always needing to be born into the world. Whether it’s through Joseph’s dreams, or Mary’s curiosity, or through one of us—God is always needing to be born into the world—through you and through me. Maybe all God needs

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is a bit of openness, some willingness to wonder if perhaps God can be made real in the world, even today?

What if Mary's question, "how can this be?" in a wider sense, is a story of what happens when humans lets God's spirit bring something to life through them. What would happen if we humans stayed curious and open, just in case God has a wild idea about being born into the world through us? Maybe that's our Advent practice this week. What if it starts with a "how can this be?" that turns into a "let it be—let it be with me?" Would we too find that nothing is impossible with God? May it be so.