

“A Story to Remember”
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Luke 1:26-35, 38

Nothing went the way it was supposed to go that day, a little over a decade ago. We checked the forecast and saw that the winter weather wasn't supposed to begin until *after* we would arrive at my mother-in-law's house for Christmas, and so we set out from our home in McKenzie, Tennessee. We made it no further than West Memphis before the sleet began coming down hard, *hours* ahead of the forecast. In just a few minutes, we were at a standstill on the Interstate, as a wreck in front of us had completely blocked progress. We sat there for about thirty minutes, and by the time we got moving again, the conditions were very bad. So bad that it was obvious not only would we not be making it to our destination that day, we wouldn't be making it any farther down the road. We exited the Interstate and looked for a hotel. We *slid* into a parking place at a hotel and ordered pizza to be delivered, *whenever* they could get it to us. That was only the beginning of the trip that I have often described as “three days, two hotels, and one ditch.” Yes, it got worse. When we finally made it there the third day after we left home, we were overcome with emotion, so grateful to God to have arrived safely at last.

If you were to ask me about my most memorable Christmas, that's probably the one I'd bring up first. How about you? Do your memories go to a Christmas when everything went exactly according to plan, or do you, too, think first of a time when the plan became a distant memory? I bet more of you can remember the Christmases that went awry than the ones that didn't. I think that's the way it is for most of us. The times when everything goes off without a hitch just do not stick in our memories the way that the most chaotic times do.

But no matter how much chaos you've had, no matter how far from the plan things seem to have gotten, this only gives us the briefest glimpse of what Mary experienced.

Here she was, a teenager of meager means from a small village few had heard of. She was engaged to be married. Her whole life was ahead of her. When, suddenly, the old plan became obsolete. Gabriel, the archangel, this heavenly messenger who brought God's word for centuries, shows up to speak with Mary and Luke tells us that Mary is "much perplexed." I imagine that is quite an understatement. I imagine smelling salts would be required for many of us in the situation. But Mary apparently handles the whole situation with composure, only asking about a technical detail – "how am I to give birth since I'm a virgin?" The angel turns Mary's world upside down. Nothing will be the same ever again, and *that* is certainly an understatement. All of the days before when things went according to plan – Mary will likely not be bringing up those days in conversation. From now on, she has this extraordinary story to tell of the first time – of many to come – when the old plan was thrown away.

This is the way that it is with God. The blessings of God are quite often unexpected, or at least come in unexpected ways. The people of Israel had been expecting a Messiah. They knew the promised one was coming, but they did not know how. Their thoughts of a mighty military ruler to overthrow the Roman occupiers turned out to be way off the mark. When Jesus did show up, as a crying baby, born to a virgin in a cattle stall because there wasn't a room for them in the inn, how many people thought, "Yup, that's just according to plan"? Maybe *God's* plan, but I doubt it was any *person's* plan for the Messiah. And it's not just that God's plan is what we would view as a reasonable alternative to the way that we think it ought to go. No, God's plan is to have a young woman who is a virgin conceive the Christ child. That's not just a different plan, that's a plan that is, to be honest, impossible. Virgins do not conceive. That's not how it works. It's as if on that trip to Arkansas, when the ice began to form on the interstate, our car had suddenly sprouted wings and flown us the rest of the way there. It's just not possible.

And Gabriel says, well, that's kinda God's specialty. "For nothing will be impossible with God," he tells Mary. *Nothing* will be impossible with God. This line probably had Mary thinking back to her spiritual ancestor Sarah, who said, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" to which God responded, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

For God, *nothing* is impossible. The impossible is often exactly where we find God at work in the world. I imagine most of us can come up with "impossible" situations in our lives. Maybe our impossible situations are health-related or involve broken relationships. Maybe they are financial or work-related. Maybe there is a certain trial you are going through or a loved one who faces difficulties. Do we believe that God is still taking on the impossible? Is this line from Gabriel still in effect? *Is nothing impossible for God?*

Walter Brueggemann, noted Biblical scholar and former professor, said to a conference of pastors, "Few of our people imagine God to be an active character in the story of their lives." So, forget the impossible for a minute, do you believe that God is still at work in the *ordinary* aspects of your life? Is God still in the business of interrupting people's lives, or did that end long ago? Is God still calling people to follow where He leads? If so, is that just for individuals, or does it extend to churches?

I think if we phrase it that way – is God still calling people to follow where He leads – then we'd all answer with "yes." And if we truly believe that God is calling people to follow, then we have to admit that it isn't too far-fetched that He just might be calling you and me in impossible situations.

God doing the impossible requires something from us, though. First, we have to be open and listening for the call of God. Mary was able to hear the voice of God calling her to do something, even something impossible. Our ears have to be open to hear God calling us, and we can't do that if we are constantly filling our ears with the things of this world. The second thing that God doing the impossible requires of us is a response. We have to respond to the call of God.

Mary just asked one question – “*how* is this to be?” – and then she responded with one of the greatest lines in all of the Bible: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Her plans were suddenly a thing of the past. People were not going to understand or likely even believe Mary when she turned up pregnant, and life as the mother of the Son of God would not be easy. No, nothing in her life would ever be the same, but the best stories are often the unexpected ones, the ones where nothing goes according to plan.

God has an amazing story for each one of us, and for First Presbyterian Church, as well. Our stories just might include a bit of the impossible, like those of our spiritual ancestors in this place who started a church on the edge of a swamp and built this beautiful sanctuary 150 years ago. They had hope, they had vision, they stepped out on faith that God would do the impossible through them. We have such stories in us, as well. And I imagine each of our stories is going to be amazing, even – and especially – if they are nothing like what we think they will be. We just have to respond. We too have to step out into the faith that God grants us by saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” And then we get the chance to see God do the impossible in and through us, giving us stories we’ll never forget, at Christmas-time, and always. Amen