“Here Am I, the Servant of the Lord”
Dr. Robert Bardeen
Ward Parkway Presbyterian
September 9, 2018

Today, our scripture lessons today speak about impossible births.

Abraham and Sarah learned about the birth of their son even though they have reached old age. Isaiah wrote about the prophecy that a young woman will give birth to a son who will be called Immanuel, God with us. And in my reading, Mary will hear about the advent of the birth of Jesus, and then later, we hear about the totally unexpected pregnancy of Elizabeth.

It is not hard to ask ourselves: What is impossible and what is possible?

Luke 1:26-38 NSRV
26 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.

What does Luke mean by “sixth month?” It’s a reference to Elizabeth’s sixth month of pregnancy. The birth of Jesus is wrapped around the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Again an angel visits someone on earth, not in the temple, but in a small town. Nazareth was considered a community without worth. Later on, one of the disciples questioned the birthplace of Jesus by saying, “How can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Luke names the angel, Gabriel, the same angel Zechariah saw in the temple. Again, it is clear that God sent Gabriel. There would be no other reason for such a visit.

The woman is Mary, a virgin who has been promised to Joseph. He is probably older than Mary, who most think was a teenager. Joseph was in the house of David, a lineage proved by Matthew at the beginning of his Gospel.

Before God sent Gabriel for the divine announcement, God had to first work in the minds and hearts of Mary’s parents and Joseph’s parents. All marriage were arranged back then, so God needed to make the necessary arrangements to get the two engaged.

Back then, there was little contact between engaged couples. Sometimes, they didn’t even know each other, but Mary and Joseph lived in the same town, and thus most likely knew each other quite well. If they did talk to each other, a chaperone had to be present, usually an older woman who would watch all contact and review all conversation.
Please note that Luke uses the word “virgin” three times in our scripture lesson. He wants the reader to know the truth about her condition. Some translations have “young woman” but the contextual history of the Greek word always refers to a virgin and not a young woman.

And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

It’s funny to consider how an angel would speak to a person on earth. Do they use the same language? Is the communication within a dream or a vision? Is it face to face?

We already know Gabriel was sent by God. He greets Mary, tells her she is favored by God, and announces the Lord’s presence. Just that information would cause anyone to step back a little. Most translations have Mary expressing fear, but NRSV uses the word “perplexed.” Eugene Peterson in The Message says Mary was thoroughly shaken.

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

Gabriel comforts Mary and repeats again that Mary has found favor with God. Mary was selected by God. It doesn’t sound like Mary will have a choice about what will happen to her. Maybe God knew the heart of Mary and thus knew what response she would have.

The news certainly is startling: you will conceive, bear a son, and give him the name Jesus. The first item of news about conception is the first level of impossibility for Mary, but she does not respond until Gabriel has a few more things to say.

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

Let’s name each attribute that Jesus is given.

Jesus will be great, will called the Son of God, will receive the throne of David, will reign forever, and will have a kingdom that has no end.

Mary responds!

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Personally, I think Mary is responding to the announcement that will conceive, and not to all the titles. Although she is quite young (most think in her early teens), Mary knows where she has been and what he has done. She knows the condition of her body. She understands the relationship with Joseph and what the relationship has not included.
“How can this be?”

On Thursday, I flew to Los Angeles. My son and I visited my brother on Friday morning. On the way there, I said to myself, “This question by Mary could also be asked by my brother: How can this be?” I tried to prepare myself for a reasonable answer. However, there is no reasonable answer.

The angel answered Mary with the facts, although the blunt statement of the facts probably did not help her truly understand how a virgin could become pregnant.

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.

Translators are consistent with the two phrases - “come upon you” and “overshadow you.”

This verse makes me think about Luke’s sources. Was he able to talk with Mary? Was she still alive when he wrote this account of the birth? Or did he talk with others who listened to Mary before she died?

Personally, I have a high regard for inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and that Luke was not alone when he wrote this orderly account for Theophilus. It is the position of Bible interpretation that all of the writers of the Bible received guidance and help and insight from God’s Spirit. At the beginning of the chapter one, Luke adds the amount of help he received from eyewitnesses. “I myself carefully investigated everything from the beginning.” For me, that investigation would have to include some kind of witness from Mary, the mother of Jesus.

So, the conception will be not human, but spiritual, and the baby will be holy, namely the Son of God, not the son of Joseph.

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.

Gabriel helps Mary with an illustration - an alive example. Mary’s aunt (most think Elizabeth was the sister of Mary’s mother) even in her advanced years is 6 months pregnant. We started this passage with the reference to the 6 months.

37 For nothing will be impossible with God.”

The jest of the illustration is this: Both you and your aunt think bearing sons is impossible, but nothing is impossible with God.
And Mary responds to the angel’s explanation.

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.

The response is an obedient heart. “Here am I” - the same response given by Isaiah when the Lord asked, “Who will I send?” “I am the Lord’s servant” - an answer we all need to memorize and use often. “Let it be with me according to your word” - the fullness of her obedience.

The third part is what we pray every Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer. “Thy will be done.” And Jesus prayed it in the Gethsemane garden: “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

In the very next verse (verse 39 which we will study next Sunday), Mary gets ready and hurries to a town in the hill country of Judea, the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. She wanted to compare, listen, share and wonder together with Elizabeth, and possibly even cry together.

I have three observations. The first one is the same observation as last Sunday.

First, God communicates to us however and whenever God desires.

Last Sunday, I said, “I’ve never had an angel appear to me, but I believe God speaks to me every day. Sometimes with kindness and sometimes with rebuke! It’s not my responsibility to schedule God. It’s not my place to tell God what to do or when to speak to me. I just need to have an open heart.” In the context of Gabriel’s visit with Mary, it needed to be said again. I marvel at the selection of the Christmas people. Mary and Joseph both came from an insignificant town. The birth of Jesus will be in a small town without dignity except that David was also born there, and the baby will be placed in a humble surrounding of hay and horses and cows and maybe even a pig. The shepherds did not have a noble standings, but in fact, were dismissed and disregarded. And the Magi (who I think were not just three, but a bunch including some women) were astrologers following the ocean of stars. What a group!

God talks to whoever God chooses to talk with according to God’s will.

Second, God can use whoever God desires to use at whatever time God wants to use them.

I already listed all of those in the Christmas story, but consider Peter, Paul, and James (you thought I was going to say: “Peter, Paul, and Mary, didn’t you?).

Peter was a strong fisherman who had strong opinions and a strong faith, but failed bitterly when Jesus was arrested. After the resurrection, the Risen Jesus forgave his sins and commissioned him to feed sheep. However, Acts 10 Luke tells us that Peter was shortsighted about the Gentiles. Peter thought the Gentiles should become Jews before they became Christians. But God wanted to continue to use Peter and caused a dream in his life, a big dream.
Peter meet Cornelius, a respected Roman, and after the dream, Peter declares (verse 34-35): “I now realized how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” God wanted to use Peter, but he had to be changed.

Paul was a bold Pharisee who wanted all Christians arrested, tried, and killed for following the Way of Christ. On the way to Damascus, he met Christ and was changed forever. God wanted to use Paul but he had to be changed.

James was a young brother of Jesus, and did not believe his older brother was the Son of God (Mark 6:3, John 7:5). Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15:7 that the Risen Jesus had a special appearance just with his brother James. Jesus wanted to use his brother, but James needed to be changed by truth.

God wants to use you as well. Are you willing to be changed by God?

**Third, as Protestants we can marvel at the willingness of Mary and learn from her without worshipping her or falsifying her motherhood.**

Mary was an amazing young woman and an amazing adult woman. She spoke her obedient faith: “Here am I, the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me according to your word.” She waited and wondered. After the shepherds left, she treasured all that happened and pondered them in her heart. She raised Jesus, her son and the Son of God. She loved him like we love our children. She watched her son leave home after he was baptized. She heard about his followers and probably made sure to be around when he taught near her home. She saw him walk by himself to the hill side to pray to the Father in heaven. She heard the rumors of hatred from religious leaders and the plots against his life. She listened to the movement of God’s Spirit as Jesus entered Jerusalem and faced his mission. She feared what would happen, but knew in her heart that it had to happen as planned by God. She saw her son walk to the place of the Skull, holding his own cross and stopping often just to get a breath. She walked with the crowd behind the Romans and religious authorities, and wondered how she could take what she knew she would see. She did not stand at a distance, and answered the Roman soldier who probably said to her, “Get away old woman,” saying, “I will not stand away. I am his mother.” She was at the foot of the cross, she hears her son say what he said, including his love when he spoke to John, “This now is your mother.” And Mary did not leave when her son died.

Then Luke tells us that when the disciples gathered after his ascension to pray about what to do next, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was present (Acts 1:14).

Mary was amazing, but Mary was not perfect. We should not pray to her. We should pray directly to our Father in heaven.

Mary was amazing and gave birth to Jesus, our Lord and Savior, but Mary also had more sons and daughters. When Jesus preached in Nazareth, they asked each other: “Where did this man
get these things? What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?”

Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters. As Protestants, we don’t think the word for brothers and sisters should be translated “cousins” which is the way Roman Catholic justify their view that Mary only had one birth, namely Jesus.

Mary was amazing and we can learn from her without idolizing her.

For me, her simple response to Gabriel is a rich lesson of humility and truth.

**Here am I, the servant of the Lord.**

On Monday, I received an email from the search committee chair from North Carolina. He called me on the phone three years ago to consider an interim senior pastor position at their church in Wilmington. He thanked me again for serving their church and leading them through so many changes that were needed. We moved from 23 Session committees to 6 Session committees, and we reduced the church staff by five full-time staff members. We increased the ministry and mission of the church by carefully selecting lay people to become volunteer staff members and lead the education department and mission emphasis. We re-affirmed our commitment to a variety of worship styles by having three worship services in three locations (chapel, sanctuary, and gymnasium) with three different styles of music (all piano, all organ with a large choir, and rock & roll). We cut the budget by $300,000 and presented a balanced budget to the congregation. And we did it all together as servants of the Lord. Working and praying together as servants!

He called me a faithful servant.

It was such a high thing to say that it made me cry.