(Im)possible

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Luke 1:26-38

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

...ordinary people came together in 1789 to do something quite extraordinary....

We hear everywhere a fiscal cliff is looming. You can’t turn on the TV, open the newspaper or surf the web without the ominous news that drastic spending cuts and tax increases are scheduled to take effect in the New Year. It may send us over the cliff unless President Obama and House Speaker Boehner, with their respective parties, can find an acceptable compromise.

I was reading this week about the first House of Representatives meeting in 1789 on April Fools Day, no less. What a dreadful day to begin a government. Congress was equally divided in those years between Federalists, who favored a strong federal government, and Anti-Federalists, who supported states’ rights. Talk about a fiscal cliff—our 1st Congress inherited a staggering debt of 50 million dollars left over from the Revolutionary War. Yet, this 1st Congress was one of the most productive in history. They passed a series of revenue bills to make the country solvent again. They installed George Washington as America’s first president (although there was protracted debate about whether to call him “Your Highness”). They established three executive departments—Foreign Affairs, the Treasury and War. They created a federal court system, headed by a Supreme Court. They sifted through 200+ amendments submitted from the states to arrive at a Bill of Rights consisting of ten amendments.

There were notable Americans among these 65 Representatives; men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Yet for the most part, America’s 1st Congress was composed of people you’ve never heard of. Representative Fisher Ames from Massachusetts remarked, “There are few shining geniuses….Many who expected a Roman Senate, when the doors shall be opened, will be disappointed.” He described his colleagues as honest and reasonably well informed. He found them to be “sober, solid, old-charter folks.” This gathering of ordinary people came together in 1789 to do something quite extraordinary in the service of their country.

Ordinary people doing something extraordinary serve as an apt description for the Christmas story. You can’t get much more ordinary than Mary
and Joseph. Luke writes that Mary is young, perhaps no more than 15, when she becomes betrothed to a common tradesman named Joseph. Betrothal is an old-fashioned word, comparable to our term engagement. Engagements in those days were far more binding. If Joseph had died during their betrothal period, Mary would be considered a widow. During their year-long engagement, they live with their respective families and refrain from all sexual contact.

During their betrothal, Mary is visited by an angel. It’s the same angel, Gabriel, who visited Zechariah in last Sunday’s story. “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.”

Most paintings in church history depict this Annunciation scene in a way that accentuates Mary’s holiness. Mary is often portrayed with a halo to express her reverence. The winged angels and cherubim underscore this holy moment. I find myself drawn to the realism of 19th century African-American painter named Oscar Tanner. While the angel is depicted as a blaze of bright light, Mary seems so human and lifelike. Her face is that of a young girl, hesitant, yet somehow willing.

“Don’t be afraid, Mary,” Gabriel reassures her, “you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (1:29-33).

Can you imagine being a 15-year-old receiving this news? You will give birth to a child; not just any child but God’s child! Mary could well be wondering, ‘Why I am being singled out here?’ I know what I would be thinking, ‘My parents are going to kill me when I tell them this.’

This story takes place in a little town called Nazareth. There’s not a single reference to this obscure village in the Old Testament or any rabbinic writings of the day. At the time of our story, there are likely no more than 2000 residents living in this small town.

“I was born in a small town,” to quote John Mellencamp’s unforgettable song. I know how people talk in a small town. I’m sure tongues were wagging in Nazareth. ‘Did you hear Mary is pregnant but Joseph isn’t the father? She claims God is responsible for it all; I tell you, the nerve of young people today!’

Mary reacts with understandable bewilderment, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel answers, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High...
If nothing is not-possible, then everything is possible.

will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God...For nothing is impossible with God” (1:35-37).

Impossible combines the word possible with the negative prefix “im” meaning “not.” Literally the verse reads “Nothing is not-possible.” Our English language mandates that two imperatives cancel each other out. A double negative creates a positive. If nothing is not-possible, then everything is possible.

The Rolling Stones sang, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” You might like the song, but they butchered the grammar. “If I can’t get no satisfaction,” then, in fact I can get some satisfaction, which belies everything Mick Jagger intended in the song. If nothing is not-possible, then everything is possible.

This story from Luke’s gospel brings into focus what is called in Christian parlance the virgin birth. How is it possible to conceive of life without a father and a mother? It certainly doesn’t pass scientific muster. The only possible explanation is what Gabriel tells Mary. Everything is possible with God.

Mary’s response to Gabriel is striking: “Let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). Mary may not understand how this conception will occur, but she is willing to surrender to God’s mysterious purposes. Her earlier question, “How can it be,” has now morphed into “Let it be.” A John Lennon song comes to mind: “Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom let it be.”

I can appreciate why Catholics give special commendation to Mary. Her act of obedience is remarkable and certainly impressive. But is the favor in response to Mary’s virtue or God’s grace? There’s no indication from the text that Mary displays extraordinary worthiness. Protestants regard her favor as something God dispenses rather than anything Mary brings to the table.

The very ordinariness of the people in this first Christmas story has long intrigued me. Last Sunday, we read an account of an angel visiting an elderly infertile couple who give birth to an eccentric prophet called John the Baptist. Today, we’re examining two unwed teenagers from a nondescript town. While the focus is Mary this morning, next Sunday we’ll consider the story from Joseph’s point of view. On the last Sunday of Advent, we’ll zero in on these no-name shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.

There are no movers and shakers associated with the birth of Christ. There are no high rollers or beautiful people in the mix. There are no people born with silver spoons in their mouths. Yet, there are all manner of ordinary people who are asked to do something
God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish his extraordinary mission. Extraordinary for God. This is the heart of the story: God uses ordinary people to carry out his extraordinary plan.

Mary and Joseph, in one sense, represent all of us in their ordinariness. Can you imagine a more unlikely couple to give birth to the Messiah?

The movie *The Hobbit* will debut next week, the prequel to Lord of the Rings from several years ago. The movie is an adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel by the same name. The main protagonist in the story, Bilbo Baggins, isn’t exactly hero material. He lacks the traditional male heroic qualities of physical strength, nobility and bravery. Instead, Bilbo is a hobbit, small in stature and ignorant in the ways of the world. He is initially thrust into a role too large for him. Fortunately, over time he grows into it.

Tolkien’s stories are rich in Christian symbolism. This is hardly surprising, since Tolkien is a committed Christian. He belongs to a literary group with another noted believer of his day, C.S. Lewis. Tolkien’s writings are consonant with a Christian worldview. The wizard Gandolf represents a type of Christ-figure and Bilbo personifies Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus’ original 12 disciples are distinctive for their ordinariness. They are an odd assortment of simple fishermen and a reviled tax collector. Jesus chooses the most unlikely people to accomplish his mission.

This nothing-is-impossible theme carries right through to the end of Luke’s gospel—to Jesus’ improbable death and unimaginable resurrection. Jesus said to his followers, “For truly I tell you if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

Nothing is impossible with God. Admittedly, it’s a great line. There’s something inside of us that wants to believe it, yet it sounds too good to be true. Some of us have become cynical and jaded through the years. We’ve been disappointed by life’s turn of events and hold God responsible. It may be an untimely death, health complications, infertility issues or some other crisis. You prayed for something, yet your prayers seem to lie on the floor unanswered.

Let me caution you here. Things aren’t always what they seem. Can you believe again? Can you trust Christ with your life?

Gabriel’s words hang in the air, “Nothing is impossible with God.” God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish his extraordinary mission. God did so in Mary and Joseph’s day; God still does today!