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**B: Advent 4
Luke 1:26-38**

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“The Impossible – Made Possible by God”

In an article this week, “What do you do with a problem like Mary?”, Bishop Hazelwood reflects on a time when he was asked to explain the virgin birth, and he replied, “Well, just remember this is all symbolic language. We get in trouble when we go down the road of literalism.” Later that day, he realized that his rather flippant response might have been perceived as dismissive, and a year later he found himself still reflecting on the question and so wrote a more complete answer. While he puts himself firmly in the camp of symbolic rather than literal belief, he offers a meaningful interpretation.

The question of the virgin birth is certainly one that tends to highlight a perceived divide in the Christian world – between those who believe the Bible literally and those who don’t.

That was one of the things that made me look down on those Jamaican Pentecostals who started renting our building 7 years ago.

They believed the Bible literally; I was smarter than that – I mean I had gone to Yale Divinity School!

It was over 2 or 3 years later when I was in conversation with their pastor that I discovered that when it came to the foundational sacramental theology of Lutheranism – insisting that we baptize in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit, and believing that we not only get bread & wine in communion but also body & blood – Lutherans were more literal than the Pentecostals!

In fact, the profound truth I discovered was that, like most things in life, there isn’t a simple binary choice between this and that, but rather a spectrum between 2 theoretical extremes.

In other words, when it comes to the Bible, virtually all Christian denominations – and all Christians – are likely to believe some things literally and some symbolically; they simply choose different things to interpret literally or symbolically.

And certainly that is true when it comes to this story of Mary. Some believe the story symbolically and some literally.

That was obvious to me at a Bible study I attended this week.

I happened to know that the leader believed it symbolically, and yet it was clear that there were people in the group who believed it literally.

I said that, obviously, as a child, I believed it literally since children are incapable of abstract/symbolic thought, but at some point – perhaps in seminary? –

I had switched my allegiance from the literal camp to that of the symbolic camp.

Then came my discovery that there weren’t really two camps – because people in the literal camp actually believed some things symbolically and people in the symbolic camp actually believed some things literally!

And so at this point in my life, I see that choice of 2 different camps as a false dichotomy -- it’s not an either/or distinction, but a both/and acceptance.

In other words, while I understand that there is a deep symbolic meaning to the story, and that maybe the story isn’t literally true,

I can also totally believe that it is literally true.

And I can believe that because of the signs and wonders and miracles I have experienced in the past five years.

I have lived and could live in either camp.

However, here's the part of the story where a symbolic interpretation loses its pull for me:

*“The Holy Spirit will come upon you & 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.
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.
For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

“For nothing will be impossible for God.”

The reason many people put themselves in the symbolic camp of biblical interpretation is because they have reached the point where they can no longer believe the impossible. And yet, to me, that's what scripture is all about – God being God, and doing the impossible! Whether it's causing a 90-year-old woman to give birth for the first time, or speaking from a burning bush, or making a dry path through the sea, or causing a virgin to conceive, or changing water into wine, or feeding thousands with five loaves and two fish, or walking on water, or healing people by laying hands on them, raising Jesus from the dead, the story of our faith isn't about the possible things in life; it's about how God breaks in and does impossible things!

I have lived in that symbolic camp of Biblical interpretation for most of my life, so I get it. I understand it.

But here's what I now believe about that symbolic camp that prides itself on its sophistication. In my humble opinion, what symbolic faith does to God and to faith is to constrain and constrict and confine who God is and what God can do. Limiting God to the humanly possible is to deny God's absolute, boundless, infinite power and to deny God's right to use that power to do impossible things in our lives.

When, confronted by the angel and his greeting, Mary was certainly struggling to believe what she was seeing and hearing. *“She was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”* And given that *“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary...’”* it seems she was fearful, as well as perplexed. When the angel explained the impossible thing that was to happen to her, she is even more puzzled and *“said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’”* And the response of the angel is to tell Mary about something impossible that is happening to her relative, Elizabeth. *“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. For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

I believe it is that reminder to Mary about who God is – about how boundless God's power and how endless God's love are – that gives Mary the faith and confidence to say, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

There I was living in my symbolic camp with all of those other sophisticated Christians,
and despite everything that I had, I was depressed.

And then I looked over to those living in the literal camp,
and I saw people who were lacking so much and yet had such incredible joy
that I had to find out more.

Like Mary, I was perplexed. How could such a thing be? Did I want to find out?
Yes! And yet I was afraid.

But just as the angel testified to the impossible thing that God had done in Elizabeth's life,
so I heard testimonies of the impossible things that God was doing in other people's lives.

And that's what gave me the courage to say,

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

If we confine God to the possible, then we're no longer talking about God at all,
but about a human conception of god.

And as long as we confine God to the possible, then the possible is all we will ever experience.

If Mary had confined God to the possible, she could never have said yes
to the impossible thing God wanted to do through her.

But because she saw God doing the impossible in Elizabeth,
she could believe that God could do the impossible in her,
and believing that, she could open herself up to the power of the Spirit of God to live in her.

I can't prove to you whether the birth of Jesus was a virgin birth or not, but I can tell you this.

When I was a child I believed it literally,

and when I was a sophisticated seminary student at Yale I believed it symbolically.

But given all of the signs and wonders and miracles that I have experienced in the past 5 years,
I am back to believing it literally.

I know that those sophisticated people in the symbolic camp will likely look down on me
the way I used to look down on people in that lower literal camp, but here's the thing:

Jesus was the one who said that, unless we have the faith of a child,
we cannot experience the kingdom of God.

I have lived in that camp of sophisticated symbolic adult faith,

and I have lived in that camp of liberating literal childlike faith

and I believe that Mary was standing between the two that day when the angel appeared.

And it wasn't until the angel told her about Elizabeth

and Mary understood that Elizabeth was in that liberating, literal, childlike faith camp,
that Mary chose to be there in that camp with her.

Having been in both camps, I can tell you this:

I now believe in a God who cannot only do the impossible,
but who does the impossible on a regular basis.

I believe in a God whose impossible acts are not confined scripture,
but who continues to do the impossible in my life
and in the lives of all who are open to that impossibility!

Some choose adult sophistication, but I like Mary choose childlike trust and joy.

And my prayer for each and every one of us is that we know the truth of today's scripture:

"Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God....

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you....

And God's very self will be born in you and through you. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And may each of us respond by Mary,

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Amen