

Believing the Impossible

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

- [0 : 00] Well, thank you, Anthony, for the privilege of opening up the Word of God in this space where you do it so faithfully.
- Anthony Brown is one of the best students of preaching I know. If you ever want to know what preaching is and isn't, you just ask Anthony. He knows what this is all about. So thank you for this honor.
- Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I love to tell the story.
- That refrain comes from an old hymn which my Swedish Baptist grandmother taught me when I was a little boy. I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
- I love to tell the story because I know it's true. It satisfies my longing as nothing else can do. And then this line.
- [1 : 05] I love to tell the story for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest. There simply is no other story that we hear and read and tell Sunday after Sunday after Sunday.
- And there is especially no other story like the part of the story we read and tell during the Advent Christmas season.
- This is by far my favorite time of the year because of the story. Now as the story unfolds, the spotlight keeps shining on the infant Jesus.
- In scene after scene. In the womb in Nazareth. In the manger in Bethlehem. In the temple in Jerusalem. The spotlight consistently shines on Jesus.
- He is, after all, what the story, the grand story, is all about. He is what waiting during Advent is all about. He is what celebrating on Christmas is all about.
- [2 : 17] He is, as they say, the reason for the season. In fact, we discover he is the reason for every season. So the spotlight keeps shining on Jesus.
- But as it does, it also shines on the Virgin. On Mary. In the womb in Nazareth. In the manger in Bethlehem.
- And in the temple in Jerusalem. But especially in the womb in Nazareth. Next to Jesus, Mary is the most significant person in the unfolding drama.
- Rightly does she say in her song, we call the Magnificat. For behold, from this time forth, all generations will call me blessed.
- Blessed indeed. Now, although some believers might take her blessedness to inappropriate extremes. Mary is nevertheless to be highly honored.
- [3 : 24] For at least three biblical reasons. First, Mary is the mother of our Lord. No one else had, has, or can ever have that privilege.
- You and I can be the Lord's disciples, apprentices. You and I can be the Lord's sisters and brothers. You and I can even be his bride. But only Mary can be his mother.

For nine months, she carries him in her womb. For years, she carries him in her arms and in her heart. Sometimes experiencing great pain.

It was she who nursed him in infancy. It was she who got up in the middle of the night when he cried. It was she who changed his diapers. It was she who washed his clothes, maybe even made his clothes.

It was she who caught him the first time he tried to walk. It was she who put band-aids, or the first century equivalent of them, on his first cuts. It was she who taught him how to speak.

[4 : 30] It was she who taught him how to pray the Psalms. It was she who gave him his facial features. Mary is the only human being who literally bears the image of Jesus Christ.

Jesus has her nose, her cheekbones, her eyes. Mary's cousin Elizabeth rightly is moved in Mary's presence and rightly cries out, how is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

The second reason she is to be honored. Mary is the first Christian theologian. I don't know if you ever thought about that. She's the first Christian theologian.

She's the first human being to reflect theologically on the consequences of her son's birth. She's the first believer to articulate what the incarnation, the enfleshment of God in our humanity, means for the world.

And this she does in her famous song that she sang in Elizabeth's house, her Magnificat, My Soul Magnifies the Lord, where she goes on to spell out the revolution that is going to come into the world because of the birth of her son.

[5 : 44] I like to call her song, The Gospel According to Mary the Revolutionary. The third reason she is to be honored.

She is the model of saving faith. Mary is the prototypical disciple. I agree with the biblical scholars across the theological perspective who argue that Luke, the physician, the writer of the story, holds Mary before us as the model disciple.

Do you want to know, ask Luke, what it means to believe in the miracle of Advent and Christmas? Do you want to know what it means to believe in the grand miracle, the incarnation?

Do you want to know what it means to actually live the miracle of the incarnation? Do you want to know what it means to be disciple of the one who is born at Christmas? Then look at Peter, says Luke.

Look at John. Look at Mary Magdalene. Look at Zacchaeus. And look at Mary, Jesus' mother. Especially, look at Mary.

[6 : 57] Again, Elizabeth rightly honors Mary. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. Mary, the mother of our Lord, is the model disciple of our Lord.

She's the model disciple because she believed the impossible could happen. That is what the text we heard read emphasizes and what I want to emphasize this morning.

Mary is the model disciple because she believed the impossible could happen. She dared to believe that the living God could do what had never been done before.

Go back into the story and try to put yourself into Mary's shoes. You are 14, maybe 16 years old. You're betrothed to a man whom you love and honor.

Betrothed means that although you are legally bound to one another, you are not yet living together. One day, while going about your normal routine, you're interrupted by a messenger.

[8 : 10] A heavenly messenger. Hail, favored one. The Lord is with you. Note carefully. Not hail Mary full of grace.

The angel does not come to Mary because she's full of grace. The angel comes to Mary because she's going to be filled with grace. She is not the one who dispenses grace. She is the one who receives grace.

Hail, favored one. The Lord is with you. Now, you have heard about other people receiving such visitations. But never in your wildest imagination did you believe it would happen to you.

I mean, why should it? You are not a priestess. You are not a prophetess. You are not a princess. Your name is not listed in who's who among the women of Palestine.

You've never appeared on Israeli Idol. You're a simple peasant. You're from a backwards village. Nowhereville. As someone would later say, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

[9 : 15] The encounter with this heavenly messenger unsettles you. I mean, it should. Gabriel, that's the messenger's name, realizes this and so says to you, do not be afraid, Mary.

You have found favor with God. Favor with God? Why? Why me?

What did I do? What did I not do? And favor for what? So the messenger explains, you will conceive in your womb, you will bear a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

Conceive? Me? A child? When? You're especially struck by the fact that the sex of the child is determined before conception.

You're struck by the fact that you do not get to give the child the name. Other mothers can give their children their name unless this child has a special place in God's salvation history.

[10 : 26] Call him Jesus. In Hebrew, Joshua or Yeshua, which means Yahweh saves or God to the rescue.

This child, my child, will be all that his names imply? The messenger continues. Your son will be great.

The term there is mega. Mega. And he'll be called the son of the most high. The child of a peasant? Mega? A boy from Nazareth?

Son of the most high? Why? The messenger continues. You mean there's more? Yes, there's more. The Lord will give your son the throne of his father, David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And your son's kingdom will have no end. Forever. No end.

[11 : 23] Reign forever. You know the promises that were given to David. You know that God promised one day God would put on the throne a king of David who would rule over an everlasting kingdom.

My son, that son of David. My boy, the long-awaited king. My child, the son who reigns over a kingdom that does not end.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would walk on water? Did you know your baby boy would save our sons and daughters? Did you know your baby boy had come to make you new?

That the child you've delivered would soon deliver you? Mary, did you know? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would give sight to the blind? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would calm the storm with his hand?

Did you know that your baby boy walked where angels trod? That when you kissed your little baby, you kissed the face of God? Mary, did you know? You will conceive in your womb and bear a son.

- [12 : 27] God, the son. The question then begins to take shape. The how question. How?
I'm legally bound to Joseph, but we've not yet had sexual intercourse. I have a child. How can this be?
Since I am a virgin. How indeed? Everyone knows that babies are conceived in only one way, by the conjoining of the male sperm and the female ovum.
How can Mary possibly conceive without the necessary male sperm? Since she did not believe or did not yet know about artificial insemination or test tube inner uterine implantation, her question by necessity focuses on her virginity.
How can she possibly conceive without the necessary male sperm? And how can she do that without sleeping with Joseph or another man?
- [13 : 35] How can this be since I'm a virgin? You can see then that Mary, the woman who experiences the miracle we call the virgin conception, virgin birth, is the miracle's first skeptic.
The second skeptic is Joseph, her husband. We in the 21st century assume that first century people had no trouble with the miraculous elements of the gospel.
We tend to think they had no trouble with the strange ways God works in the world. That's simply not true. The Christmas miracle does not fit the modern and postmodern worldview, but it did not fit Mary's worldview either.
That Mary's cousin Elizabeth could conceive John the Baptist in her advanced years was believable. Surprising, but believable.
It fit the prevailing understanding of reality because that miracle still involved the sperm of her husband Zachariah. That Sarah could conceive Isaac when she was older than Elizabeth was believable.
- [14 : 47] A little out there, a little of a stretch, but believable because that miracle still involved the sperm of her husband Abraham. But this, this is something altogether different.
This is something outside the realm of human possibility. How can this be since I'm a virgin? So, the angel goes on to answer Mary's question.
And as is often the case when angels answer questions, he only highlight, heightens the mystery. The angel tells Mary that the how of the miracle is a who.
The how of this miracle is a who. The messenger says, the Holy Spirit. That's the who. The Holy Spirit will come upon you.
The power of the Most High will overshadow you. And for this reason, the offspring will be called the Son of God. This child will be conceived without human agency.
- [15 : 56] The agent of conception will be the Spirit of God. Now, mention of God's Spirit would take a Jewish mind back to the opening verses of Genesis.
There, the Spirit hovers over the void of nothingness. And out of that void brings into being the first creation. In Nazareth, the same Spirit would now overshadow the void of the virgin's womb.
And out of that void bring into birth a new creation. In the words of New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, the conception, birth of Mary's son is an extraordinary action of God's creative power as unique as the initial creation itself.
As unique as the original creation itself. Which is why the scientific mind cannot finally wrap itself around this miracle. We're dealing with something brand new.
There's no precedent. In the scientific world, you need a precedent for something to understand it. There isn't a precedent. There's nothing with which to compare it. It's not a naturalistic happening.

[17 : 08] And so it cannot be understood on merely naturalistic terms. The how is a who. The creative, powerful, life-giving Spirit of God would come upon this peasant girl, causing her to bear a child who could only thus be called Son of God.

Now, how the who did it, we do not know. No one knows the exact mechanism by which this concession took place.

I doubt that Mary herself understood. If we were to ask her now, I think she still would not understand. After all, as her son would later say to the Rabbi Nicodemus, the wind, the Spirit, blows where it wills.

You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it's coming from or where it is going. So is it with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Why can this who be the answer to the how?

The angel declares, For nothing will be impossible with God. For Mary, the human being, it is impossible to conceive apart from the natural process.

[18 : 27] But it is not impossible for the Spirit of the living God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

The angel is expanding Mary's worldview, Mary's understanding of reality. She, like so many of us, thought only in terms of human resources and human possibilities.

For all of her piety, she still looked at the promise only from the perspective of what humans can bring to the table. The angel had to expand Mary's view of life to include the divine.

This is why Gabriel makes reference to Elizabeth. Elizabeth's pregnancy in old age is a sign to Mary that God can do what looks impossible. Now, Gabriel could have also pointed Mary back to the beginning of creation.

The God with whom she has found favor is the God who, in the beginning, brought creation out of nothing.

[19 : 31] Ex nihilo, as the theologians like to say, out of nothing. In the beginning, there was God and nothing else. And then out of that nothing else, God calls forth the something we call creation.

It is that God who makes this impossible promise. Mary would later discover that her son's whole earthly career is one of human impossibilities, from his conception to his resurrection.

Christian statesman Richard Mao puts it this way, In both womb and tomb, God calls life out of nothing.

Our God is found of working that way, which is why he often lets us get to the end of our ropes. This is why he lets us get into situations where there seems to be no hope, where the human possibilities and resources are hopelessly inadequate, if not already exhausted.

For in that hopelessness, God can be who God is to us, the God of the impossible. Now, although you and I will never experience what Mary did, her experience is a picture, an analog, of what God wants to do in each of us and in the world at large.

[21 : 00] The church has understood for nearly 2,000 years, as John Stott reminds us, that Mary's experience, which in one way is absolutely unique, in another way is typical of the experience of every believer.

It is? Typical of every believer? Well, I love this part of the story. I love to tell this part of the story.

Growing, developing, forming in the womb of Mary is the body of the incarnate God, the body of Emmanuel, God with us. That is a never-to-be-repeated experience.

But get this. The life in that body, the life in that body, the zoe, the unique, ungenerated, eternal life, dwelling in the body, growing in Mary's womb, now dwells in anyone who belongs to Mary's son.

I should say that again. The life in that body, the ungenerated, unique, eternal life, dwelling in the body, growing in Mary's womb, now dwells in anyone who belongs to Mary's son.

[22 : 22] The living God wants to put within each of our broken lives the very life of his son. Jesus would later say, live in me, and I in you.

They who live in me, and I in them, bear much fruit. I in you. You in me. In, in, in, in, in, in, in, the apostle Paul was captured by this.

He loved the preposition in. In his letter to the Ephesians, he says he's praying that Christ might dwell in you. In his letter to the Colossians, he puts it this way, the mystery is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

He expresses it most boldly in his letter to the Galatians. In the same chapter where he says, in the fullness of time, God sent forth his son born of a woman. He goes on to say, my children, with whom I am in labor until Christ is formed in you.

Isn't that a wonderful way to put it? Galatians 4, 19. My children, with whom I am in labor until Christ is formed in you.

[23 : 38] Paul dares to use the language of conception, gestation, and childbirth to describe what is happening to us and in us. Paul is saying that to be a Christian is to be impregnated with the very life of the son of God.

The God of Advent and Christmas says to me and to you, I will come to you in my son and live in you through my spirit and my spirit will move in you, regenerating you, cleansing you, filling you, breaking the back of crippling habits, overcoming the power of sin and you will begin to take on the character traits of Jesus.

You'll begin to manifest Jesus' love and joy and peace. You'll begin to exercise Jesus' patience and kindness and generosity. You'll begin to live Jesus' faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.

You'll learn to deal with stress the way Jesus deals with stress. You'll learn to love the unlovely the way Jesus loves the unlovely. You'll learn to face death the way Jesus faces death.

And like Mary, we ask, how? How can this be? How can this be since I am by nature and will resistant and stubborn?

[25 : 03] How can this be since I'm so powerless over the things that seek to enslave me? How can this be since all my life I've tried to change patterns of behavior?

Oh Lord, how can this be since I'm surrounded by everything that fights against a vital spirituality? How? Who?

The how is the who. The angel speaks to Mary, nothing will be impossible with God. The God of Advent and Christmas is the God of the impossible.

We can change. The world can change. And this is where Mary, the model disciple, comes in. She's the model of what it means to now participate in the humanly impossible.

In his book, True Spirituality, Francis Schaeffer, one of the leading theologians of the 20th century, pointed out that Mary had three choices in the face of the humanly impossible promise.

[26 : 12] And I think they're the three choices that we face. first, Mary could have said, it is impossible, period.

There's no way this can happen. I don't want anything to do with this. Mary could have just walked away, as, sadly, many do in our time after meeting Jesus Christ and hearing his claims.

Many say, it's just impossible and walk away. If you are here today and you're feeling that way, I urge you to reconsider. If this is the first time that you've heard that it's possible for the life of Jesus Christ to be in you and you're skeptical, I urge you, don't walk away until you've investigated more.

If this is the 10th or 20th time you've heard this and you've become hardened or cynical, I urge you, do not walk away without giving it another trial. Mary didn't walk away.

There's a second choice. Mary could have said, now I have the promise of a child and I'm going to exert all my effort and I myself will bring forth the Son of God.

[27 : 33] What were Mary's chances of success? Like zero. Yeah. She could have gone to all the Lamaze classes offered in Nazareth.

She could have learned all the self-realization techniques that are taught at the local meditation clinic. She could have done all the positive and possibility thinking that was advocated on Galilean television daytime programs.

but she could have never conceived and given birth to the Savior. Never. So too with us.

Try as we might. We cannot produce the life of Jesus in us. Do I have a witness? Try with all our might. We cannot redeem ourselves.

We can't even make ourselves look redeemed. On our own we are spiritually barren and impotent. We do not have what it takes to realize the kingdom of God in our city.

[28 : 39] Mary knew that so she didn't exercise the second option. It is, however, the option most of us are exercising. I myself will bring forth Christ-likeness in me.

Yeah, right. It would have been absurd for Mary to think she could conceive the Savior with only human resources. It's also absurd for us to think that we can conceive, give birth to, and nurture the Savior's life on our own.

We cannot make it happen in ourselves, in our family, in our church, in our city. Yet we keep trying which explains why we get frustrated and exhausted.

There's a third choice. It's the one Mary exercises. She says, Behold, I am the bond slave of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.

Mary took God at God's word. She did not completely understand it. She did not know where it was all going to go. She simply admitted her inadequacy and trusted her life to God's promise, or as I should say, trusted her life to the God who promises.

[30 : 01] In the face of the humanly impossible, she opens herself up to the one who has infinite resources and says, Here I am.

I cannot make it happen. I cannot make it happen. But you can. So I give myself to you. Fulfill your word in me.

It is not a matter of giving up. It's a matter of giving in. Giving in to what is beyond the realm of human possibility.

Giving in to the creative power of the Holy Spirit. What are you facing right now that seems so impossible? Financial stress?

Marriage issues? Your own? Your children's? Your parents? A child? A grandchild? Health issues? Coworkers? People with whom you're trying to share the gospel?

[31 : 03] Depression? Depression? The future? You do not see how it comes together? Mary, the Holy Spirit will come upon you.

The power of the Most High will overshadow you. It's the same thing Jesus says to all his disciples at the end of the Gospel of Luke. You will be clothed with power from on high.

You see, God chose Mary not because Mary was competent for the role. God chose Mary because God knew Mary would admit how desperate she is for God.

What are you facing that seems so impossible? Do not give up. Give in. Give in to the power beyond all human power.

And with Mary, mother of our Lord, first Christian theologian, and model disciple, say, I'm your servant.

[32 : 16] Be it done to me according to your word. let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand.

Ponder nothing earthly minded for with blessing in his hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth our full homage to demand.

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