

Responding rightly to God's IMPOSSIBLE plans

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. I haven't done this in front of people for a while. It's a bit nerve-wracking. Great. If you could please keep that passage which Estelle read, that would be really great.

And I don't know if you realised this when she was reading, but today and last week is actually the same story. On the surface, the two don't look the same, but in both stories, the angel Gabriel tells people about God's plans for their lives.

Last week was Zechariah. We're going to compare him to a pregnant Mary today, and that's not going to be easy for him. I mean, she's pregnant with Jesus.

She is the darling of the Catholic faith. They even prayed to her as though she was divine. Let's spare a thought for poor old Zechariah. But then let's spare a thought for the men in this room today as well.

It's not easy for any man to relate to a pregnant lady. When my wife was... And I, we often talk about that time in our lives. I often utter the phrase, when we were pregnant, which is pretty cheeky, isn't it? Because we were never pregnant.

[1 : 12] Only Rachel was. For the dads out there, when your kids were born, do you remember that time? Was there ever a time in your life where you felt more hopeless and helpless?

You're doing great, honey. Just keep pushing. Actually, am I correct that there was a time when men weren't even allowed in the labor wards?

And you'd all... Oh, they're nodding, I'm getting. You wouldn't get that at a 10.30 service. Men would have to wait by the phone or by the bar in the local pub for the news.

It's hard for men to properly relate to pregnant Mary in this story. But actually, it's going to be hard for the women to relate to Mary as well.

Because regardless of how special our bundles of joy were, none of us ever gave birth to God's King. If my birds and the bees are still correct, all our babies required a mummy and a daddy.

[2 : 08] But obviously, Mary famously did it all on her own. Depending on how you count things, Jesus' fathers were Joseph, David and God.

But he only ever had one mum. Depending on how you look at it, whether you're a man or woman, Mary is unique. Giving birth to the Messiah, that's just not the business any of us are in.

And so this passage, it might just be simply Luke giving us the facts and figures about how Jesus came to be. He wrote an orderly account, remember?

But I think we can do better than that. You see, I think Luke has put Zechariah and Mary alongside one another in chapter 1. The idea is that we compare and contrast them.

You see, Luke is going to teach us how to respond rightly to God's plans. For Mary, in our story, there's an unexpected visit, an unbelievable announcement and an impossible situation.

[3 : 17] Maybe if Mary really was a God, like Catholic people thought, she could plan a normal, quiet pregnancy. But will she trust God's plans when his ways are not hers?

Will she trust in his timing? Will she take God at his word? Will she trust in the future he has planned for her? These are all the same things that we need to grapple with when it comes to God in our lives and his plans for us as well.

Even though Mary is hard to relate to, she is unique in God's plans. He also has plans for us. He planned for Mary to be Jesus' mother, but he wants us to be the brothers and sisters.

You see, in that way, we're all in common and related. Mary is Jesus' family and so are we. And so Luke will use her to train us how to respond rightly to God's plans when they seem impossible and hard to trust.

So firstly, there's an unexpected visit when the angel Gabriel comes calling. Normally, when we think of angels, we think of, you know, sort of chubby babies in harps or beautiful Scandinavian people in white pajamas.

[4 : 39] But in the New Testament, angels are scary creatures. Actually, every time they appear, they first have to calm people down. In verse 30, the angel says to Mary, do not be afraid.

See, Mary lives in the real world where scary angels just don't come calling. And twice she's told, verse 28 and verse 30, that she's favored by God.

And that is confusing to her because there's nothing special about her. She's done nothing to earn his attention. What's more, she's from a very non-special place, Nazareth, a town in Galilee.

It's all very unexpected. But what comes next is unbelievable. Verse 31. Please look down with me. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. The Lord will keep him the throne of his father, David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

[5 : 48] You see, God's present to the world at Christmas is a king. And maybe after COVID in Victoria and elections in the US, you're exhausted by the idea of another leader.

But isn't it true that every time a new one turns up, there's still a part of us that holds out hope that as impossible as it seems, maybe this time things will be different.

For Mary and Israel back then, they were pretty exhausted by leaders. They were under Roman occupation. Their own Jewish leaders were corrupt and ungodly.

But they still held out hope, as impossible as it seems, that God would send a saviour. And the angel Gabriel tells Mary that now is the time.

The clue is in his name, verse 31. You are to call him Jesus, which means God saves. The Lord will give him the throne of his father, David.

[6 : 50] That is the great monarchy of Israel, reborn. It's a fulfilment of a thousand-year-old promise, which God made in our first reading, which Calvin gave to us earlier.

Mary has clearly married into the special family. Verse 33. And Jesus will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

And I don't know how you feel about the idea of a forever kingdom. I guess it depends on the leader. So the queen, she's pretty good, isn't she? The queen has been queen for 68 years and 10 months to the day.

I did a bit of maths there. And that is pretty good. She is quite, we quite like the queen. But across the Pacific in the US, things have gotten a bit messy. One king has just been shown the door.

Who knows if the next one will be any different? The idea of a forever king is a little bit jarring to us here in the West. When it comes to human leaders, we need the protection from those rotten apples.

[7 : 55] I think that's probably why so many countries favour elections and term limits. But did you notice what is different about Jesus? Verse 32. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high.

Back in ancient cultures, the leaders used to be called the son of the gods to make themselves seem better than they were. But Jesus is already great in God's eyes.

He's the son of the most high. And unlike all other human leaders, he has all the goodness and purity of his father. And I think the idea is to watch Jesus in Luke's gospel and to ask yourself if his kingdom is one that you want to keep going forever.

If his kingdom is one that you would want to join yourself. And all of that, I think, is quite an unbelievable announcement. That's quite a lot for one conversation. It's hard for Mary to grasp that. So verse 34. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? Years ago when I was an accountant, I had a colleague called Ben who I used to evangelise.

[9 : 12] And on paper, there was loads about Ben's personal life that seemed to be a barrier to him becoming a Christian. But for him, the sticking point was the virgin birth.

He just could not get past that. You see, Ben lives in the real world where virgins can't give birth. Are you sure, Vijay? He said to me. But Mary lives in the real world too.

She's not ignorant about human biology. She recognises her virgin status. When she says, how will this be? I think she's just acknowledging that how impossible this is for her.

And that God will have to step in and solve it. And so in verse 35, notice how God steps in. The angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow

you.

So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. I wonder if God was coming to earth, can you think of a better way to get our attention than to bend the ordinary laws of human biology?

[10:21] And as a sign of proof, verse 36, even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age. And she who is said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

For no word from God will ever fail. Or in other words, nothing will be impossible with God. And watch Mary's extraordinary reaction.

Verse 38. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. In response to impossible pregnancies, Mary trusts God's word.

In fact, she believes him so much. Verse 39. She got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea to visit her relative Elizabeth. You see, she took God at his word.

She was convinced that despite Elizabeth's age, she would conceive. Mary trusted, verse 37, that no word from God would ever fail.

[11:22] And it's not that Mary is ignorant about human biology. She lives in the real world where old women and virgins can't conceive. But she is just happy to let God be God.

And take him at his word. And leave the impossible things to him. In fact, Mary's response is so good that she is commended by the Holy Spirit.

Verse 45. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promise to her. And our author has lined up the story of Mary with the story of Zechariah.

He has brought us to this point so that we would start comparing and contrasting them. And as we compare them, I wonder if you realize how similar the stories were.

So in both stories, the angel Gabriel visits. There are two unbelievable announcements. Two Old Testament prophecies fulfilled. Two Old Testament heroes reborn. Two impossible pregnancies.

[12:24] And two special, special babies. John the Baptist and Jesus. You see, when we compare them, the stories are almost the same. But the key lies in the contrast.

The contrast of how Zechariah and Mary respond to God's plans. For Zechariah last week, when the angel said, Your wife Elizabeth will have a baby. He said, verse 18, How can I be sure of this? Which is just like my colleague Ben. How can you be sure, Vijay? Zechariah is overawed by the basic biology. He doubts that God can do what he said.

He needs more proof. Which is pretty rich. Given that he was speaking to an angel. And the verdict on him was verse 20 last week. I'll read it to you.

And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens. Because you did not believe my words. Which will come true at their appointed time.

[13:27] But for Mary, verse 45 today. Blessed is she who has believed the Lord. And even though that verdict was written for Mary, that verdict can be true for us today.

Because it's no less hard for us to trust in God's plans. They seem no less impossible for us sometimes as well. For starters, God's ways are not our ways.

Perhaps you thought God was opening a door for you that was perfect for you and your circumstances, only for it to be closed a couple of days later. Does the likelihood of your prayers being answered seem impossible?

God's timing is not our timing. Andrew said last week, it's been 400 years since God had spoken through his prophets. How many years have you been waiting for God to answer some of your prayers?

Perhaps we're happy for God to do the impossible miracle bit, but we're just not sure if his ways are good. Especially when there's so many bad things that keep happening, such as COVID and we're all sitting in church with masks on.

[14:37] And maybe if we were God, we would organize the universe in entirely different ways. But not letting God be God is basically the root of sin.

It's the idea that I can do a better job than God, that I need to push him to side and step in myself. But our passage says that God already has a king.

And a defining issue when Jesus turns up, whether we have trusted in his word, whether we're happy to let him be God.

Because when he arrives, he will redefine what impossible is all about. He'll defeat the temptation of the devil. He'll heal people of every sickness.

He'll send evil packing. He'll even bring people back from the dead. Impossible, the skeptics will say. But Luke lives in the real world.

[15 : 39] He wants to deal with our doubts head on. You'll remember he wrote to Theophilus. He wanted to give Theophilus certainty. Maybe perhaps Theophilus was doubting the things that Jesus said and did.

A virgin birth? Too impossible to be real. But when Jesus turns up, he'll do much more than just miracles. Because he's also God's king.

And there are protocols, aren't there? For every time you meet royalty. There's the do's and don'ts of meeting the queen. You know, do bow when you meet. Do speak when you're spoken to. Don't ask questions about Charles and Camilla.

Don't do what every world leader does and place your hand on her back. See, when they do that, she hates that. We can't just meet royalty on our terms. Even more so for the forever king.

The people back then, they were preparing for his arrival. But we are preparing for his return. In both cases, we need to know the correct protocol.

[16 : 44] We need to know how to respond to him rightly when he arrives. And his word to us today is, Be humble like Mary.

Verse 38. I am the Lord's servant. To take him at his word. Verse 45. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his word.

His promise to her. And that's going to be tough, isn't it? God's ways are not our ways. His timing is not our timing. It will take humility to submit to Jesus.

To trust in his word. Even when it feels impossible. And so I think that's why Luke finishes with Mary's song at the end.

It's just a little flourish at the end about her impossible God. And what he has done in the past. I'm going to read it out to sort of close us out here.

[17 : 43] But I want you to notice how God looks after Mary. And everyone who copies Mary's example today. Let me read it.

Listen out. For how God responds to Mary. Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed. For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him. From generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arms. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones. But has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things. But has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel.

[18 : 39] Remembering to be merciful. To Abraham and his descendants forever. Just as he promised our ancestors. You see being Jesus mother is unique.

All generations will call her blessed. But letting God be God. Submitting to Jesus. That is blessed too. Lots of people don't want to be led by God.

And by Jesus. But will we be like Mary. Will we do verse 38. I am the Lord's servant. Will we take him at his word like verse 45.

Blessed is he who believes that the Lord would fulfill his promise. Even when his ways aren't ours. Even when things seem impossible. And as we go forward.

This will be a defining issue. About Jesus kingdom. And about being a part of that. So let me pray. As we finish.

[19 : 43] Father God. We thank you for Mary. Her humble example. That she took you at your word. Regardless of how impossible. A virgin birth seemed.

Father please would we be like her. Would we be humble. And submit to Jesus. Would we take him at his word. Even when his plans for our life seem impossible.

Even when your timing. Doesn't operate according to our agenda. Please would we humbly submit and trust. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.