



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Living the Impossible With God" - Real Faith for Real People Series

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**L**uke 1:26-38 - In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

<sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.

<sup>31</sup> You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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.

<sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God."

<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

I'm sure you have noticed how commercialized Christmas has become. In fact, I truly believe if the whole country became atheistic tomorrow they could never end Christmas because it has become so central to our economy.

One British writer put it this way, "From a commercial point of view, if Christmas did not exist it would be necessary to invent it." (Katharine Whitehorn)

But as much as Christmas had been commercialized somewhere below the dinners, the gifts, the sales at Marcy's and Target, below Mele Kalikimaka, below the blinking lights, is real Christmas meaning and real Christmas mission.

So this morning I want us to spend some time looking afresh at Christmas meaning and Christmas mission. I want to do this because as a Christian my hope is that you will experience the joy and hope of Christmas and participate in its continued mission long after the presents are put away, and the tree is dumped off as rubbish, and after the so called "holiday spirit" evaporates and life and traffic and office politics

and doing homework and paying tuition kicks back into full gear.

Over the past may weeks we have been discussing what it means to live out a real faith for real people in the real world. And the story of Mary presents to us something essential for that journey: an attitude and a commitment that helps to change the world we live in. Now that's a big claim, but let's look at what I mean.

As I mentioned last week, to gain a deeper appreciation for the people in these Christmas stories we need to understand the cultural context in which all of this take place. We would lose so much of the force of what is happening without it.

Mary lived in a politically and economically oppressed situation. The Jews were occupied by a pagan country, Rome, who would sometimes line the highways of Palestine with crucified Jews to send a clear message of who was in charge.

Mary's religious system and her Jewish government offered little encouragement because they too were often corrupt and placated Rome instead of serving their own people. She also lived in a day when women were treated like chattel, a thing of property.

**M**ary herself lived her whole life in great material difficulty. She never rose above a peasant life. After she gave birth she had to flee in the middle of the night into the desert and ended up living as a refugee abruptly cut off from family and home for several years, all because some raging maniac king, named Herod, wanted to kill her Son. Later she became a single mother in a man-centered culture. She saw her Son rise to great fame, and then saw Him reduced to great pain, anguish, betrayal, and brutality.

Have you ever just paused to consider how hard this all was on this woman? She must have been unbelievably gutsy. Her courage literally knew no bounds. After all, how many of us would sign up for some of the things I just mentioned?

So when you look at the larger context of her life we can see that this Christmas mission is fraught with challenges from the get go, with things that make its success seem impossible. But the thing that makes all the difference is that this "impossible life" was that is was an "impossible life" with God.

Let's take a deeper look at some of the details of her story. First of all, verse 27 states that Mary is a virgin. The word for "virgin" means that not only that she was sexually chaste, but that she is very young, maybe just in her mid-teens.

Just think of this for a second. What an interesting prospect that the salvation of the world is in the hands of a teenager. I'm nervous about giving them the responsibility of a driver's license, much less raising the Savior of the world (present company notwithstanding; I would totally trust

any of you guys with the salvation of the world).

Now imagine that scene of the announcement and conversation with Gabriel. Here is a young girl in a small town going along just like any other day. And then boom! An angel tells her with no advanced preparation this enormous news:

*You will...give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great...will be called the Son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob (i.e. Israel) forever; His kingdom won't end.'* Can you imagine as a teenager hearing all this?

At first Mary responds to the angel's declaration with the obvious question of, "How will this be possible because I am a virgin?"

Then the angel says the power of Holy Spirit of God will come upon her. And then so as to reassure and give confidence to Mary, he shares how Mary's much older cousin who was long thought to be infertile is pregnant. And then he ends with this, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

I then love her reply. This poor, peasant, teenage girl says in the face of the impossible says this: *"I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me according to your word."*

I'm struck by a lot of things here but let me just mention a couple. The word "servant" in verse 38 really is the word "slave." I point that out because Mary is not stepping up to be a mere "volunteer" in the work of God. She is not saying I will do what I can when I have the chance in my

spare time. She is using a term here that says, "I am all in."

This is exactly the kind of life and attitude through which God changes a world. And changing a world is what Christmas is all about and was only about.

Let me make this very clear that may not have been written in your Christmas card this year. Christmas is the radical in-breaking of God into the human condition in order to change it in its entirety—to change the person, the community, the society, the economics, the politics, to change all of it!! That's why Christmas came.

Make no mistake, Jesus didn't come to tweak and upgrade our spiritual practices and beliefs. He came to radically transform what we know to be truth, what we think to be the meaning and purpose of life, what we think justice is, or what spirituality is, and to change our concept of God.

He came to fully transform what it means to be human, and to offer his life and death as the means to eradicate all things that prevent such transformation from happening. Did you read that in your Christmas card this year? But that is what it was all about.

Sound a bit grandiose? Listen to how Jesus put it. When Jesus gave His first sermon in this very same town of Nazareth about 30 years after our story this morning, He quoted from a section in Isaiah that gave a succinct summary of His purpose.

Let me show you the fuller text from which he quotes.

**I**saiah 61:1-3 - *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the lord has anointed Me; to bring good news (the gospel) to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the lord's favor, (viz. debts are forgiven, slaves freed, etc.) and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them (these brokenhearted people) a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They (all those oppressed, brokenhearted, and despairing people) will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the lord for the display of His glory.*

Do you see in this a radical transformation of the person, the community, and the society? You want to know the why and what for of Christmas? There it is in a nutshell. Any Jew in first century knew of this divine intention of the Messiah. Mary had heard about this intention and Mary wanted all in.

When the angel throws out terms like, "You will call him Jesus" (meaning God is salvation), she knows what that implies. She knows that it means a lot more than "you will now be able to get to heaven."

She knows the implication of words like, "He will be the Son of God the Son of the Most High...He will have a throne like David...And will rule over Israel and His kingdom will not end." She knows exactly what all that implies. It implies a revolution has begun! And she wants all in!

And so the question her reply creates for us is this: Are we all in for the Christmas revolution?

You may be thinking, "Steve, that's nice idealism. But I'm too old for this. I'm too young for this. The issues are too complicated to get all excited about this stuff. The divisions and hatred are too deep to see all of that Isaiah 61 stuff become reality. Steve, didn't you hear what just happened in Germany and Turkey? Have you not seen Aleppo? Have you never heard of ISIS?"

If you are thinking that, what can I say? You're absolutely right. If I keep my eyes on these problems, then yes, Isaiah 61 and the hope of the Christmas mission is impossible. Yes, my brothers and sisters, there are indeed impossible things in our world. And then there are the impossible things with God.

I bet there were days when Mary felt a bit cynical when she looked out her front door, just like we do. When she saw her family suffer hardship day after day, or when she saw how her people were hung up on crosses, or when she saw the corruption of tax collectors and the powerful. I bet all of that made her cynical.

But Mary heard something that day from the angel that changed everything. When she asked about the seeming impossibilities the angel tells her, "For nothing will be impossible with God." And those two words gives us hope in the "impossibles" we face.

On a personal level the list of impossibilities may include: Finding a spouse, having children, raising children, or getting your kids through college. Maybe it is facing financial hardship, facing a severe illness, surviving a divorce, or even a death in the family.

On a larger societal level, the seemingly "impossible" may be actually seeing our culture and society change to reflect God's character. Or maybe feels impossibly to end homelessness, or end human trafficking, or even leading Muslims to peace through Christ, etc. Sometimes all these seem impossible.

But here is the deal. I really believe we are in a time where God is still looking for folks who will engage these "impossibilities" with the same heart and spirit as Mary. And respond with a "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me."

When it is asked, who is going to lead an increasingly non-Christian culture to Christ? I pray our answer is, "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me." When it is asked, "Who is going to pray for healing of the sick?", I pray our answer is "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me." When it is asked, "Who is going to fight injustice and end human trafficking and end homelessness?", I pray our answer is, "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me." When it is asked, "Who is going to befriend and lead Muslims to Christ?" I pray our answer is "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me."

Do you hear what I'm saying this morning? You may be thinking, "Hang on Steve. Calm down a little. I'm not there yet. I just want to go home soon and watch some football and have some chicken wings." There is a lot I can say that can help you step into what I'm talking about so that it doesn't become idealistic and instead becomes realistic. We are limited for time so let me just lay one idea on you, because if this isn't there then it makes it hard for anything to move forward.

**F**rom what I see as I reflect upon the life of Mary, a crucial issue is this: Mary was wide open and responsive to God's surprise orders.

Think about it. This whole episode is a total surprise to Mary. When we meet Mary in Luke chapter one she is an engaged, peasant, teenager in a little small, insignificant town with perhaps an unsavory reputation.

She probably got up that morning thinking about how she needed to get some yeast to make bread or go down to the well to get the water for the day. In other words, she was not exactly planning how she was going to help change the world.

But God in His graciousness calls peasant Mary, nobody Mary, teenage Mary to something she never sought or asked for, and it will help change the world forever.

Do you find that encouraging, not idealistic, but inspiring and hopeful for your life?

My point is, sometimes where God wants us go and what we are looking to do in life are not always the same. This is why to live into God's plans for the world we need to be open and responsive to the "surprise orders" from God—on the most ordinary of days and in the most ordinary moments.

Have you ever felt God's plan for you fall into place while doing the most ordinary of things?

After becoming a Christian in my last year in college I soon wanted to go into the ministry. But when I looked in the mirror I knew what I saw, just a nobody from Jersey, who was a

physical education major, who didn't know a lot.

But one day after college, after a very routine day at work as a personal trainer, I ended up watching on TV a World Vision telethon while I ate my dinner late at night. As I watched, something hit me deep in my soul. It was like all the stars in the universe aligned. In that very moment, I knew God was calling me to be a missionary to the poor and hurting in our world.

Now it took about a year and a half to see that come to full fruition, but that is how my surprise orders started. And my life has never been the same since.

The reason I am telling you all this is because I didn't sit down that night on the sofa thinking, "Tonight's the night God is going to give me my call to ministry and I'm going to know where my life will go for next several decades."

The reality was this. On a most ordinary day, doing the most ordinary of things, being one of the most ordinary of guys you ever met, this "surprise order" from God eventually took me to refugee camps in Asia, and to the mountains of Nepal, and to the streets of Bangkok and to the poor of Thailand, and to the homeless of Oahu, and the government offices of Hawaii to change trafficking laws, and on to helping people walk through some of the most hurtful and gut wrenching issues of their lives. Bottom line, on that ordinary night, many years ago, I never saw any of this coming.

So my question is this: What would have happened if I just went to work that day, came home, ate my

dinner, and then as I watched all those poor people, just shrugged my shoulders and said, "Wow, how tragic. But it is impossible to make a dent or end all this."

What if I just got "sensible" in that moment and thought, "The problem's too big. It's all too complicated. People are too sinful. Anything I do is just a drop in the bucket." Ever notice how "sensible" arguments tend to be very pessimistic? It's hard to do the impossible when we are so "sensible."

Brothers and sisters, are you open to the surprise of God? Does your "openness" have certain "limits" to it? If so, why? What might the world be missing because we remain closed?

All that being said, let me be completely honest. I struggle often with trying to trust God with the "seemingly" impossible. There are days where I actually throw up my hands and shout to God, "Forget it! Nothing's going to change. The sin and evil in our world is so pervasive, ministry it is just a naïve and foolish and hopeless endeavor. Who am I kidding?! Forget it!"

And then when I pray, meditate, and read scriptures I hear Mary's angel all over again: "Nothing is impossible with God." And I read again how Jewish slaves escape Egypt without the use of weapons. How barren women give birth to children at 90 years old. How shepherd boys kill giant men and become great kings. How walls come tumbling down on a city without a shot fired. Or how one day swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and nations will not train for war anymore.

Is all that impossible? Yes. Is all that impossible with God? No way.

Through God's presence and by His grace the impossible can happen and will happen. And I'm going to stake my whole life and career on it.

My greater point is, sometimes we have no idea of what God wants for us, but as we remain open and responsive and take a small step forward in obedience, His amazing and greater will gets manifested. Sometimes it will be in grand ways. Most times it will be in small ways.

But the issue isn't about being grand or small. Because however God will use you, I can guarantee you it will be significant. Most of what Mary did for God was in obscurity, but what she did every day was always significant to God.

Let me share with you an obscure, but significant story. There was a Christian Japanese woman who went to Canada for a short time. While there she felt burdened by the problems of prostitution. She also felt she couldn't do much to make a difference. Her English was not super great and she didn't know how to tangibly share the love of Christ and get into conversations with them.

She so went back home to Japan. But interestingly, in Japan she didn't apply to a Bible school. Instead she enrolled in school to learn foot massage. After her training she moved back to Vancouver. She then rented a small closet sized room along the street where many of these prostitutes worked.

She would invite these women to come in and sit for a just a few minutes. And through her hands and her broken English, she said that she

would tell these folks, "God loves you and I love you."

So just picture all this. Here you have this broken English speaking Japanese lady giving massages to physically battered and soulfully shattered women. And this obscure Japanese woman may be the only voice in the lives of these women that ever said and truly meant, "You are loved by God and me." Small? Maybe. But, wow, is that significant.

For some of the most marginalized and shunned folks of society this "foot lady" uniquely became that hands and ears and words of Jesus. I'd say she was doing a pretty good job in continuing the Christmas mission.

For a lot of us, before we sign on, before we say we are all in, we want to see the future a bit. Where will this take me? What will this cost me? We often love to feel certain and safe before we jump in, amen?

But let me point out, Mary didn't know a lot when she said, "Let it be with me" where this would all take her. She didn't know Herod was going to try and kill her baby. She didn't know she would have to live in Egypt for several years as a refugee. She didn't know her son would be betrayed, beaten to a pulp, and hung naked on a cross. She also didn't know there would be resurrection. The point is, she didn't know a lot of things before she said yes...and neither will we. If you want to figure it all out before you take the first step, you will never get out of the starting gate.

So I won't sugar coat it. Anyone who truly commits their lives to the mission of Christmas will encounter all kinds of stress, strain, and

difficulties. But here are two phrases you will never hear put together, "We played it safe—and the world changed."

If that was Mary's mentality, to play it safe, what would have been the outcome?

I know some of us sit here and feel way to "ordinary" to live into what I'm saying. Let's face it, we know that on a good day we are a bunch of recovering sinners with all kinds of issues, scars, and wounds and all kinds of sin. We are just regular people with regular jobs, who find it a challenge just to change a light bulb, much less change a world.

But try to look at your life this way. Instead of ordinary, see it as unique. You have had a unique journey, not just an ordinary one, but also a unique one, with Jesus. Which means you have unique experiences and perspectives to share about Jesus with others—experiences and perspectives that I as a preacher cannot express.

Your particular personality gifts, education, circumstances, even heartbreaks and brokenness can reveal something about Jesus that is not quite being seen in the world in other ways. Through you and your unique journey, Jesus wants to uniquely love the world and people around you.

A friend of mine, Roy Sakuma, is mostly known for being an eminent ukulele teacher. But a few years back as he came to Christ, doors opened up to speak to elementary, junior high, and high school kids.

**W**hen he speaks with them he shares openly and honestly about how he grew up with a parent who had mental illness and all the difficulty and pain and the shame that brought him and his family. And after he shares his unique journey and experience of pain and healing kids just mob him. They open up to him. They express to him how they find hope for their own lives from what he had to say.

The point is, Roy has lived a unique journey and Jesus is using him to uniquely love on kids—kids who are suffering so deeply and so silently often without adults even knowing about it. But they tell Roy because he shared about his life and about what happened. And all this comes forth from a non-clergy regular guy who knew a lot of pain.

Let me be honest and you might find this a bit surprising, after 32 years of ministry I've learned this: In our modern culture preaching has its place in the work of God. But it is one of the least effective ways to make an impact on people's lives. I know it can impress and may enthuse people, but most often that only lasts for a short period.

But real change and lasting impact comes through the day in and day out interactions with people. It comes when we truly listen to people dialogue with people and asking them questions, and showing real interest in their lives. It comes in the timely sharing of words of encouragement.

Again, you may see these efforts as small things, but they are significant things that change a soul. And changed souls change a world.

Is there a way you can speak a word of hope to a hurting friend this week? Is there someone over whom you can pray healing? Is there someone you can break bread with, or share your money with, or just simply sit and listen to in Jesus' name?

Finally this. The last time we see Mary is in Acts chapter one, now in her late forties, after Christ ascends to heaven. She is in constant prayer in the upper room in Jerusalem (a very unsafe place at that point) with her family and the other disciples waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

What amazes me is that despite all that had happened, she still wanted more of what this crazy adventure had in store...the adventure of living all in with God and His Christmas mission.

If what she went through wasn't worth all the ups and downs, the poverty and pain, then she is a severely deluded woman who is a masochist, or she is on to something.

The world changed in part, because a peasant, semi-educated teenager from no-where's Ville, on the most ordinary of days said, "I'm the Lord's servant. Let it be with me."

I can't wait to see what happens in 2017 when you and I say the same.

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)