

Luke 1:26-38

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Date: 14 November 2019

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[0 : 00] It's God's living and active word.! What do we believe?! We probably believe many things. ! The thing about believing is, we find it more likely to believe when we find something plausible, isn't it?

When we can make sense of it and it fits into what we already know. There's a name for that, it's called confirmation bias. We believe the things that confirm what we already know.

But more than that, even often, we believe because of who tells us the things that we believe. And you might believe the moon is made of cheese when you're three years old.

Because your parents told you the moon is made of cheese. And parents wouldn't lie to you, would they? But give it a few years and they work it out.

[1 : 17] Those children, slowly but surely, what we want to believe plays a bigger role in who we believe. There's a big word for that, it's cognitive dissonance.

We don't believe things that don't fit with what we've decided make sense. And when we see things and hear things that don't fit with what we believe, we dismiss those things.

Because it doesn't fit with the values that we've decided to believe already. And that's part of why the world feels so divided right now. People won't hear each other.

They won't believe each other's bona fides. Because they can't hear each other. Because they won't believe the other side. And last week we heard of a promised son, John the Baptist.

And his father, Zechariah, despite hearing this promise from the mouth of the angel Gabriel, didn't believe the promise of a son for him and Elizabeth.

[2 : 27] Did he? He placed more faith in his knowledge of biology and human physiology and his experience than a word from an angel who ministers in the presence of God.

When we don't want to believe, we find it very hard to believe. So when we come in this passage to the second angelic promise, the second angelic announcement of a son in as many weeks, we're actually primed, aren't we, for another slightly disappointing experience.

Where seemingly a sceptical recipient of God's grace doesn't believe it, when he or she cannot believe it, because they don't want to believe it. Now Zechariah's wife was unable to conceive and they were old, and the angel Gabriel made an unlikely promise to them.

She will conceive and bear a son, and he will be great before God, and a prophet of the Most High. As we saw, we had some sympathy for Zechariah, didn't we?

It is an unlikely promise in those circumstances. And we had some sympathy for him as he struggled to believe this unlikely, incredible promise from God.

[3 : 47] But if that was an unlikely promise, today we have what looks like an impossible promise. Because of all the people, this young girl Mary, while in her teens, from a backwater town called Nazareth in Galilee, also gets a visit from the angel Gabriel.

And she's also promised a son. And the only difficulty here is, she's not married. And as she reminds the angel, verse 34, she is a virgin.

Literally, she says, I have not known a man. You know, they were not stupid in those times, like we sometimes think, in our arrogance. They knew that babies didn't come by pollination in the air.

So she knows what she's talking about. And it's enough reason for her to disbelieve the message, isn't it? You will conceive a son, but she has not slept with a man yet.

But there's more to the story even than that, that makes it an impossible promise. And look closely at what the angel promises her. In verse 30, she has found favour with God.

[5 : 08] She, a young unmarried girl from nowhere? That's not how society works, or worked. And what does this favour entail? She will conceive and have a son, and she must call him Jesus.

A child named by God. This is incredible. Impossible enough, given her circumstances. But there's even more. He will be great.

He will be called the Son of the Most High, and he'll be given the throne of his father David, the great king. God's first chosen king for Israel. And the one from whom the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, would come.

Put yourself in her shoes. That just sounds utterly impossible. And not just that, he will reign forever, with no end to his kingdom.

We're used to governments and rulers coming and going, and often they stick around way too long. And it feels like there will be no end to their rule.

[6 : 13] But inevitably, they do go eventually. So this is all an astonishing promise. Even disregarding the practicalities of how she would conceive a child in her unmarried state.

There's a reason why immaculate conception is shorthand in our language, isn't it, for something that's impossible? And because this angel's promise is drenched in language about God, there's no doubt that this child is God coming to the world as a human.

Never mind the biological impossibilities. Is Mary being the mother of God, being born as a human being in Jesus Christ?

I think maybe the impossible promises are the most believable sometimes. The most impossible promises are the most believable if we realize who is making them.

We don't know all of what Mary understood of what the angel said to her and how much she grasped. And we're looking back at this and we know a lot more than she did at that time.

[7 : 31] But she understood enough to realize this would be a difficult situation for an unmarried girl. And she expresses that to the angel. How will this be, since I'm a virgin?

And we think, when we hear that, there's a lot of echoes from the first passage we read, isn't there? Zechariah also expressed some doubt. There's an angel, fear, a significant child is promised and named.

There's some doubt. And there's a sign or instruction about what's coming next. But really what we see when we listen at Mary's response to what the angel tells her is strikingly different to what Zechariah said.

He was afraid at the sight of the angel. Mary is troubled at the saying, if you look at verse 29. Not the angel.

You could actually translate that as well as perplexed. She wondered at what it might mean, what this angel is telling her, that she is favoured. Now you could say she's got a natural difficulty to understand why she would be considered favoured by the Lord.

[8 : 48] But Zechariah probably has more of an irrational fear at the sight of the angel in the temple, being a priest. And note how she doesn't ask for a sign.

But she gets one anyway. You know your parent cousin Elizabeth has conceived in her old age. There's nothing impossible for God, Mary.

Your cousin Elizabeth, who is in her old age and was barren, is already six months pregnant. And if we look closely, we see some differences as well in the description of this child, don't we?

John the Baptist was going to be great before God. This child will be great. Period. Verse 32. And that's more Old Testament language for God there.

God is the only one called great without any kind of qualifier. Zechariah and Elizabeth will conceive a son. Previously impossible, but now possible, but still through normal means.

[9 : 58] Mary will conceive not a son, but the son. And this son will have no human father. The Holy Spirit will overshadow her.

And that's all, again, Old Testament language if you listen closely. God dwelling with Israel in the tabernacle. You know, it's the same kind of language. And we're primed here for this impossible promise through all the language and all these descriptions.

And on many levels, it seems like the promise to Mary is the more impossible promise to believe. Doesn't it? We know about medical miracles and it fits with our experience.

And we chalk it up often to something we can't explain and we move on. But as I said, we often believe what we believe primarily because of who it comes from.

And Mary, contrary to Zechariah, realizes who this promise is coming from. And verse 38, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

[11 : 04] Let it be to me according to your word. Have you ever, growing up, had to do something scary? Something you didn't think you could do?

And then your father takes your hand and looks at you and he tells you, trust me, you can do this. What seems impossible and like a completely implausible promise for Mary becomes not just believable but desirable when she takes into account who it is making the promise.

Many people say they can't believe Christianity because they can't believe the miracles recounted in the Bible. But that's working backwards. Of course miracles don't make sense.

If there isn't a God who can do the impossible. But if there is such a God then miracles just point to him. He doesn't depend on them to be real.

And this miracle, this arguably greatest miracle ever, God becoming man, happens in private, out of sight, as verse 31 reminds us explicitly, in Mary's womb.

[12 : 29] But God becoming man, the Son of God taking on human nature is unheard of, impossible by any human standard or story or myth.

But it's not impossible for a God who created all things out of nothing, is it? It isn't impossible for a God who created the first human beings and breathed life into them and who raised people from the dead as Jesus did.

It certainly isn't impossible for Jesus who himself rose from the dead as he promised to do. So when we consider who God is, this promise of who Jesus is becomes not just not impossible but actually very plausible.

of course God can promise that his Son will reign forever if he is the eternal God who created heaven and earth. When the earth was formless and void we read at the beginning of the Bible the Spirit hovered over the water and God spoke and everything came into existence.

And of course he can create a human being also God out of nothing when the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary. She didn't ask for it she didn't desire it she humanly speaking had no role in it but she is chosen by God to be a part of the greatest miracle ever seen and she believes it because she knows the God who promised it.

[13 : 59] I don't know if you've seen but the supermarket Shane Little has a has a Christmas slogan this year a Christmas you can believe in. No we have a surprise for them an all powerful God promising to provide a saviour for the human race who will rule forever and who can create life where there was none or where it's utterly impossible is more believable than a promise of happiness because of low prices for Christmas crackers and stolen bites.

and I think the problem for us might be closer to home we might even be able to believe that Jesus is the son Jesus is the son of God and that he became man that he was the promised saviour Israel had waited for and who all the prophets and John the Baptist included promised but when we hear that our sin can be forgiven that this promised son took it all upon him we forget who he is and react more like Zechariah when he was promised the impossible many people wouldn't argue with who Jesus is or deny that he is the son of God come to be a man but they won't be able to believe that all they have to do to be saved is to believe that the son of God died for them and that if they believe in him they too will rise from the dead they might think and this might be you today that they'll never be able to break from their sin never be able to change never be able to be saved because of what they've done that it's too great too much and too bad that seems like an impossible promise to many many people but thinking that forgets that there is right now a man in heaven Jesus Christ was born 2000 years ago by the power of the Holy Spirit from a young virgin called Mary who God himself has promised will reign forever and who even death couldn't hold that forgets that he promised that whoever believes in him will be saved it forgets that he promised he will intercede for us right now it forgets that when he promises to raise those who believe in him to eternal life he has already gone before us all things that seem impossible but it has happened it's natural for us to look at our own hearts and think we can't be saved if we're honest about what we know about ourselves we wouldn't save ourselves very often but like Mary faced with impossible promises we need to look at who makes those promises rather than what we think is possible because we're rarely a good judge of what is possible if we're honest about that as well

Elsa Mandela said it's always impossible until it's done to paraphrase that Jesus being conceived in this way reminds us that it is impossible unless it's God doing it and then the great comfort to us as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1 all the promises of God find their guess in Jesus so this Christmas let's consider how God has shown us favour us undeserving people done nothing to deserve his favour like Mary by fulfilling for us an impossible promise let's believe that promise and say with

Mary behold we are the servants of the Lord let it be to us according to your word Amen let's pray