

December 4, 2005

The Hope of Christmas

Luke 1:26-38

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I am looking forward to seeing the film version of C.S. Lewis's, *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which opens in theatres on Friday. It is an engaging story I first read as a child and re-read last month in anticipation of seeing the movie. For those of you who may not know the story, it is about four children, two sisters and two brothers, in England during World War II, but it mostly occurs in the land of Narnia which the children discover through the back of a large old wardrobe. Narnia is under the curse of the white witch and is in the midst of a 100 year winter. It is always winter, but never Christmas and the creatures that dwell in Narnia live in fear, despair, and hopelessness. There doesn't appear to be any possible way the situation will change until ...well you'll need to go see the movie or read the book.

Some of us may feel like we're living in Narnia; that where we live it is always winter, but never Christmas. We may be blanketed with grief over the loss of a loved one and the loneliness that accompanies grief like a Siamese twin. Looking around at all the terrible things happening in the world we may shudder in despair of things ever getting better or be frozen in fear for what kind of world our children and grandchildren may live in. In the winter of our own life we may feel hopeless over our physical condition or that of someone near us. In today's Gospel lesson Luke mentions two women who are at very different points in life. Elizabeth is in her old age, she has been happily married a long time but her greatest disappointment is that she has never had a child and there doesn't seem any possibility that she will. For her it has been winter, but never Christmas and the gift of a child. Mary is an ordinary young unmarried woman with her whole life in front of her who all of a sudden is confronted with a possible future she never imagined in her wildest dreams. Both women are surprised by God's possibilities.

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.*

*He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.*

*He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

Mary said to the angel, *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*

The angel said to her, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and 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.***” Then Mary said,

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

Then the angel departed from her.”

Gabriel comes to Mary with a message that sounds impossible to believe. It is beyond all that we have known. Have you ever wondered how Gabriel felt about delivering the news? Frederick Buechner's little book of character sketches of people from the Bible has this to say about the angel Gabriel as he encounters Mary: “She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘*You mustn't be afraid, Mary,*’ he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl.”

In a way, we are in the same position that Mary was all those years ago. We are asked to decide for ourselves whether nothing will be impossible with God. Is God limited by our understanding, our comprehension, our experience, or are there all kinds of possibilities with God, possibilities expressed in Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:20, *“Now to him who by the power at work within us **is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.**”*

**Each of us has to decide what our approach to life is going to be.**

**We can be skeptical, cynical, and doubting. We can be trusting, hopeful, and obedient. That choice is totally up to us to make.**

**There is something about Mary that teaches us about hope and possibilities. Possibilities with God begin with being available to God.** In saying, *“Here am I,”* Mary is echoing the words of two of Israel's greatest prophets, Samuel and Isaiah. As a boy, Samuel was ministering under the priest Eli at a time when the word of

the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread. One time when Samuel was about 12 years old, he was lying down in the temple and he heard the voice of the Lord calling him repeatedly (1 Samuel 3:1-10). At first he didn't know it was the Lord, so he kept on saying, *"Here I am!"* and reporting to Eli who sent him back to bed. After the third time, Eli realized the Lord was speaking to Samuel so he instructed him to say, *"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."* The Lord spoke to him and gave him a difficult message, but Samuel was faithful to proclaim it. As Samuel grew everyone came to know that he was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord and no one had greater influence than he did – all because from the time he was young he made himself available to God.

In a similar way, the prophet Isaiah was in the temple when he had a vision of the Lord and heard the voice of the Lord saying (Isaiah 6:1-8), *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* And Isaiah replied, *"Here am I; send me!"* Like Samuel, the message Isaiah was given to speak was difficult to share because it was a word about the disaster that was coming upon God's people because of their disobedience, injustice, corruption, and lack of care for the poor, but it included the promise that God would preserve out of the remnant a future. Hope was not completely lost.

Mary is also asked to serve God in an amazing way, even more so than Samuel or Isaiah and her response is, *"Here I am."* If we would like to experience God acting in powerful ways in our life, then like Samuel, Isaiah, and Mary, **we need to be available to God**. There are some things that are within our control that open us up to God's possibilities. Opening our life to the Lord by regular times of worship, reading God's word, listening to Christian music, sharing time in prayer, doing our work with our eyes and ears open to the Lord speaking to us, serving others – these are all ways of making ourselves available to God. Gabriel tells Mary she has found favor with God, she is special. If we are engaging in habits or practices on a regular basis that are not pleasing to the Lord, we shouldn't be surprised that we don't sense the Lord's presence or hear the Lord's voice.

If **being available to God** is the first step to God's possibilities in our life, the **second is being a servant of God**. God may not do something as dramatic in our lives as God did for Mary; however, Mary is a model of faith and obedience. When she asks how all that Gabriel says will come to pass, the divine messenger concludes by saying, ***"For nothing will be impossible with God."*** Mary's attitude and determination are the response of a true disciple. It is her response that opens her up to the possibilities that God has for her. *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord."*

The idea that nothing will be impossible with God is expressed twice in Luke's Gospel once to Mary who is an ordinary, common, relatively poor young woman. The other time in Luke 18:18-27, when a wealthy ruler with a great reputation comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. He had wealth, power, reputation, and influence, but he lacked what Mary possessed – a servant's heart. Jesus invited him to be one of his disciples and to come with him, but he could not because he was possessed by his possessions. Jesus makes it abundantly clear in his ministry that he came as a servant saying of himself that he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Paul writes in Philippians 2:6-8 how Jesus *"though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross."*

Like the Son she would bring into the world, **Mary was willing to identify herself as a servant of the Lord and to make herself available for God's purpose.** If **being available to God** is the first step to experiencing God's possibilities in our life, and the **second is being a servant of God**, then the third is **believing the word of God**. God is still looking for people who will say to the Lord:

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

God is looking for people like Mary who are available for God's purposes:

who are trusting, hopeful, and obedient, whose self-understanding is that of a servant of the Lord and who believe that God can do through people what seems to be impossible.

People who don't know what is impossible often accomplish what is unthinkable. George Danzig was a senior at Stanford University during the Great Depression. All the seniors knew they'd likely be joining unemployment lines when the class graduated. There was a slim chance that the top person in the class might get a teaching job at the university. George was not at the head of his class, but he hoped that if he were able to achieve a perfect score on the final exam, he might be given a job.

He studied so hard for the exam that he arrived late to take it. When he got to class, the others were already hard at work. He was embarrassed and just picked up his paper and slunk into his desk. He sat down and worked the eight problems on the test paper; then he started on the two written on the board. Try as he might, he couldn't solve either of them. He was devastated. Out of the ten problems, he had missed two for sure.

But just as he was about to hand in the paper, he took a chance and asked the professor if he could have a couple of days to work on the two on the board he had missed. He was surprised when his professor agreed.

George rushed home and plunged into those equations with a vengeance. He spent hours and hours, but he could find the solution for only one of them. He never could solve the other. It was impossible. When he turned in the test, he knew he had lost all chance of a job. That was the darkest moment of his life.

The next morning a pounding on the door awakened George. It was his mathematics professor, very excited. *“George! George!”* he kept shouting, *“You’ve made mathematics history!”*

George didn't know what his professor was talking about. The professor explained. Before the exam, he had encouraged the class to keep trying in spite of setback and failure. *“Don’t be discouraged,”* he had counseled. *“Remember, there are classic problems that no one can solve. Even Einstein was unable to unlock their secrets.”* He then wrote two of those problems on the blackboard. George had come to class late and missed those opening remarks. He didn't know the problems on the board were impossible to solve. He thought they were part of his exam and was determined that he could work them. **And he solved one!** He did the impossible. That very morning the professor made George Danzig his assistant. He taught at Stanford until his retirement.<sup>1</sup>

The possibilities with people are still unknown; the possibilities with God are unimaginable. Mary has the courage to believe God's word to her and the faith to act in response. She stands in a long line of faithful people who in their own time may not have been understood or accepted, but who were loved and used by God.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer that was on television this past Wednesday evening. Among other things, Rudolph is a story about hope and possibilities. Poor Rudolph feels different from everyone else from the time he's young. He's not accepted by his father, he's teased by the other reindeer his age; if the show was made today he'd be in therapy. He's told *“even among misfits you're a misfit.”* He is feeling hopeless for much of the story as are all the toys like the Charlie in the Box on the island of misfit toys. Rudolph first appeared on TV in 1964. So many folks wanted to know what happened to the poor toys that they remade the ending for the 1965 showing to include Rudolph returning to the island. I told the folks at Bible

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<sup>1</sup> *Defining Moments* by Rick Ezell InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2001.

study this week that I had to get home in time to see the rescue on the island of misfit toys. The poor toys believe that once again they are forgotten and it seems all hope is lost for another year. I've been watching that scene my whole life and I still get teary eyed because I'm sentimental and because it touches on the truth that God loves us and God has sent Jesus to rescue us from our islands of isolation where we feel like unloved, unwanted misfits. In the midst of despair hope can emerge for the future and for possibilities with the Lord and with our sisters and brothers in Christ that we haven't imagined. God loves us, we are not forgotten. God has a place and a purpose for us.

Possibilities with God begin with being available to God, being a servant of God, and believing the word of God.

Hebrews 11:6, *"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."*