

Eternal Possibilities against Earthly Realities
Luke 1:26-38

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Mary said to the angel, "How can this be . . . ?" Lk.1:34

The earthly realities around her gave the heavenly promises Mary heard from Gabriel slim chance of ever being true. We are in a closely similar predicament, but let's study the Bible case first before turning to present-day applications.

The Bible case

Mary heard the angel Gabriel describe her future. He said she was favored and that God was with her. More than that, he went on to say that she who had never been with a man was going to have a child, and that her child would bear the name Savior, that he would be great, that he would be called the Son of God, and that he would be king forever.

Mary knew that the odds against anything remotely like that ever happening were tremendously great. She had a grip on reality and was likely fairly certain the angel did not. After all, who was she to be favored? Surely there were others she admired and wished she could be like. We imagine her to be humble enough to demur at the thought of being called deserving. Beyond that, even as a person of faith, what had she really seen to show that God was with her? At the words "The Lord is with you" she may have thought immediately of Gideon's retort way back in the Old Testament: "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" (Jgs. 6:13a) And, still more to the point, to put a cap on it all and be done with it, how could she who never has been with a man give birth to a child? Even if she could have a child, how on earth could any child of hers save anyone else? How could he rule over a kingdom that for all practical purposes did not exist? Her country was little more than a vassal state of Rome. And how in the name of all things reasonable, could anyone, her child or not, reign everlastingly? The angel spoke of hopes high and wonderful, but not one of them had a chance to become reality.

Surprisingly, Mary believed. She believed in the flimsy possibilities against the hard realities. If we wonder what fed her belief, I imagine we have to say it was because the promises came by way of an angel. But Gabriel left her as quickly as he came, and she may, in the angel's absence, have doubted her own experience and chalked it all up as a figment of her imagination that never really happened. "What a silly girl, you are!" she may have said to herself; "Angels, indeed!"

But Mary believed. She believed then and she went on believing. She kept on trusting in the possibility of the impossible. I think she believed, at least in part, because it was the way of her people. From way back in time there was in her heritage always hope in a God who could bring something out of nothing. Before there was anything – before there was *anywhere* for *anything* to be – God, just by the effort of voice, put something somewhere. Those old ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, never thought they would be anyone's ancestor. They were a childless

couple and long passed their childbearing years. The idea of a child born to them, the idea of more descendants than could be numbered, was laughable. When the angel came to them, they did laugh. So the record of Mary's peoples' past continued through their deliverance from slavery and through their restoration from exile. Every step of the way there was sure, stark, and sturdy impossibility, and yet there was still God who could and did intervene. Earthly realities, strong as they were, never stopped the eternal possibilities.

So when Mary wondered, "How can this be . . . ?" and Gabriel reminded her that "nothing [is] impossible with God," Mary had a basis for believing.

Some applications

Well, that is the Bible case. Let's bring it into the present day. All we have to do is to run a string of questions and earthly realities around us present themselves as walls thick, high, and impossible to penetrate.

Can our nation survive the current reality of its deep-seated and entrenched division?

Can humanity come to live in a way that is not destructive to our planet?

Can the gospel go on being proclaimed when so much that passes for religion these days turns people off, some because of its narrow cruelty, some because of its arrogance, and some because of its dullness?

Can the ordinariness of life with its wearying routines become a place where blessing abides?

Take any one of those questions – or any question like them that you care to ask – and you know harsh realities enough to shake your head and say, "How can that ever be? It won't happen. It can't happen. There's too much against it."

But listen to and even memorize the gospel according to Gabriel: nothing is impossible with God. And right there is the Advent we are in. It is the same as Mary's Advent and Creation's and Abraham's and Sarah's and Moses' and Isaiah's. It is an invitation to be convinced that God can yet do something in spite of everything. It is an invitation to believe that God can and will act in this present day to give birth to what we think is impossible. Hope in that and live on the edge of your seat in high expectation. Say to God, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."