

**December 18, 2011: NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD**

**Luke 1:26-38; Romans 16:25-27; 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16**

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From the time he could toddle, my brother was the kind of kid for whom barriers and obstacles were a mere technicality. My grandfather used to say of my brother that first he would do the impossible and *then* he'd do the possible. That character trait has served him well in a career that helps inventors put their good ideas into production. As a culture, we admire the all-American ingenuity and stick-to-it-iveness that overcomes the impossible. My career in construction spanned a time of pushing the boundaries of *impossible* for buildings. Our cities are now filled with steel- and concrete-framed skyscrapers, instead of low, stone-walled Gothic buildings—all because humans pushed the impossible in architectural and construction practices. Gabriel brings Mary an invitation from God and tells her that nothing will be *impossible* with God.

Maybe you played the childhood game, in which you think up things impossible for God to do. We'd play and get preposterous, but our dad always said *nothing* was impossible for God. Until the day we discovered an exception—that God couldn't make a rock too big for God to lift. That worked for me, until this fall when Terry Fretheim gave another exception. The one thing God cannot do is to be unfaithful to who God is, especially when it comes to the covenant commitments. Was that what Mary knew, so she could say yes to that preposterous invitation to the impossible?

The problem I have with focusing on Mary's sinlessness (as the Church often does), is that it makes her *yes* too easy, like it didn't cost her anything. Sure, her answer reflects a deep integrity, a genuine submission to God's will. But by emphasizing her purity, we've removed the scandal of God's incarnation. *Of course* it is outrageous that the Creator God would be so vulnerable and small as to be carried in the womb of an ordinary mortal. It was *meant* to be scandalous. That the Almighty would become a vulnerable baby is mind-boggling. That the Mother chosen by God is as ordinary and regular as any other human being rest of us, speaks more of the Giver of the gift, the One who bestows such favor. This wasn't about Mary; it was about God.

What sets Mary apart from us ordinary folks is the extent to which she trusts God. God would be so much more manageable, and our lives that much simpler, if only God looked for perfection in the instruments chosen to bring about the Reign of God. Mary has spent her whole life preparing to get married, have babies, keep house, provide the environment in which her husband and children could love God. That was the sole career track open to a nice Jewish girl, and it could not get more ordinary. She stands in a long line of ordinary people who encounter God and whose lives are thereby changed as they learn to trust God. Unlike most of the others, she doesn't try to convince God to choose someone else or belittle her own credentials (think Moses). Mary simply consents. She lets God do the giving and only works on perfecting how she receives God's gift. From the text we're given, her consent was not a resounding "YES!!!" that reverberated through all of creation. Theologically speaking, it was in its consequences, but for today, Mary's consent sounded more like, "OK . . . yes, I guess." She only did what she'd been equipped all her life to do, acting in a way that was consistent with who she was.

Now, it is true that Mary asks a question very similar to that of her cousin Elizabeth's husband, when he was told that his barren wife will have a son. It's a question for which he is struck speechless. Mary's "How can this be?" wasn't a question of disbelief. She stated a rather obvious fact, but did not shut down God's possibilities. She submits to the impossible. There is a difference between resigned and submissive. Resigned closes out possibilities, submissive is open to the impossibilities. Mary is not *resigned* to being the Mother of God's Son when she says yes, she *submits* to God's invitation. She leaves room for God to do more.

Oh man, if only it were that easy for the rest of us. It's like we've bought into this cult of the extraordinary. When we make Mary so extraordinarily holy, we can figure it's only really pure and holy people who are asked to bring about God's Reign. Not *us*. There's nothing extraordinary or special about us, we're just ordinary, lowly, plain folks. Off the hook. But I'm here to tell you, God's Reign doesn't come through extraordinary people. It comes through ordinary people like us, embracing it in their daily lives. "Embrace" as in, put your arms around it, rest your cheek against it, listen to its heart beat, submit to it. Our baptismal vocation is to bring about God's Reign, to let it infiltrate the most ordinary parts of the world, through the most ordinary of means—through us and our lives. Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary use words.

It is true that we can't change the world. But we can start living *as if* it has changed. When we refuse to perpetuate violence in any form, we usher in the Reign of God. When we take even baby steps to reduce our carbon footprint, feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the sick, stand up to bullies, protect the oppressed. When we consume less and spend more time in silence. That's Reign of God stuff. These are not the actions of extraordinary people. They are the actions of ordinary mortals such as ourselves. They usher in the Reign of God, because they are how we make God's Reign incarnate in the here-and-now. God doesn't need extraordinary people; God needs ordinary people living as if the world has changed.

I know. There are so many immense changes that need to take place in the world, most of us figure, "Why even start?" But that's our vocation, by virtue of being baptized. After her conversation with Gabriel, Mary's next speech is so famous we've given it a name—the Magnificat. It's a speech of vocation. The title comes from its opening word in Latin, "magnify." We are so numbed to the Biblish, so used to the thousands of songs and settings for it, that we've stopped wondering what that means. "My soul magnifies the Lord." What is that in English? It means both "make bigger" and "make more." It means the speaker functions as a magnifying glass, to make God larger, more perceivable in the world, *and* it means that the witness of her life multiplies God's work. The reason there are so many settings for the Magnificat isn't because we venerate Mary. It's because she speaks for all of us. Our Christian vocation is to make God larger in the perception of those around us, to multiply God's works and thereby usher in the Reign of God. Hear the Magnificat today, as what God does still—through us.[the Magnificat, Luke 1:46b-55]

If we really believe God's ultimate plan for creation is justice, righteousness, peace—there's no reason not to start living that way now, to act as if "nothing is impossible with God."

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