

“The Irrational Season”
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First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Luke 1:26-38

In 1993, FBI agents conducted a raid of the Southwood Psychiatric Hospital in San Diego, which was under investigation for medical insurance fraud. After hours of reviewing thousands of medical records, the dozens of agents had worked up quite an appetite. The agent in charge of the investigation called a nearby pizza place with delivery service to order a quick dinner for his colleagues. This is a true story. The phone call was not recorded, but the agent who made the call remembers it going something like this:

Agent: Hello. I would like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda.

Pizza Man: And where would you like them delivered?

Agent: To the Southwood Psychiatric Hospital

Pizza Man: The psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That's right. I'm an FBI agent.

Pizza Man: You're an FBI agent?

Agent: That's correct. Just about everybody here is.

Pizza Man: And you're at the psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That's correct. And make sure you don't go through the front doors. We have them locked. You will have to go around to the back to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas.

Pizza Man: And you say you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. How soon can you have them here?

Pizza Man: And everyone at the psychiatric hospital is an FBI agent?

Agent: That's right. We've been here all day and we're starving.

Pizza Man: How are you going to pay for all of this?

Agent: I have my checkbook right here.

Pizza Man: And you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizzas and sodas to the service entrance in the rear? We have the front doors locked.

Pizza Man: I don't think so. *Click.*

Then there's this other story. Maybe you've heard it. It goes something like this:

Gabriel: Hey there, Mary!

Mary: Yes?

Gabriel: God really likes you. He wanted me to tell you that.

Mary: Thanks!

Gabriel: Oh, and He wants you to have a baby – not just any baby – *His* son, the Messiah.

Mary: Uh, and how's that going to happen, since I'm a virgin?

Gabriel: Oh, don't worry about that. The Holy Spirit has got that part covered.

Mary: I don't think so. *Click.*

That's pretty much it, except for that last bit where instead of hanging up, Mary said basically, "You're the boss, God! Whatever you say!" I've always been amazed by that, by Mary's great faith. Mary, this young woman, is approached by the ultimate angel, Gabriel, and all we know is that she was "perplexed" at the greeting, and then when Gabriel spells out the whole situation, she asks *one question* of him and that question is "How?" It's not "Why?" or "What are you *thinking*?" or "*What?*" or "Are you kidding me?" or "Where's the candid camera?" It's simply "How can this be?" It's a question of logistics.

Mary wondered how this would be possible, knowing it was impossible for people. Gabriel said, "For nothing will be impossible with God" and Mary said "Good enough for me. Let it be." How astounding is Mary's faith! We too often get bogged down in the details. The church's influence in society is waning. We're all living busy lives. We're just ordinary people. How can God use us? That's just not possible. Gabriel responds, "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" We say, "I'm getting on up in years. My health is not so good. How can God use me?" And Gabriel says, "Even Elizabeth conceived in her old age and was used by God for God's plan. *For nothing*

will be impossible with God." We say, "I'm just too busy with work and family and everything else. How could God possibly use me?" Gabriel says "God has used the likes of you before. *For nothing will be impossible with God.*" And when Gabriel tells us this, do we say "Good enough for me. Let it be."? Or, do we continue to argue out the details?

What this Gospel lesson for today tells us is that it's not up to us. I would imagine Mary didn't daydream of growing up to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary likely was thinking ahead to her marriage to Joseph and how they would live out fairly ordinary lives. And God breaks in and changes everything. God changes the *impossible* into the possible. And was it because Mary willed it to happen? Did Mary somehow cause this chain of events to take place? Of course not. Mary was God's instrument. *God* made it happen. Mary had to be willing to say "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Around this time of year, we start seeing signs and hearing messages that say "Put Christ back into Christmas." William Warren, a mentor of mine and a pastor in the Memphis area, says he saw a church sign advertising a sermon titled "How to Christianize Your Christmas." And, to be quite honest, I used to agree with such sentiments. That is until I read William's words from an Advent message. It seems reasonable to say that we should all work harder to "Put Christ back into Christmas." After all, we are so busy and so focused on the materialistic aspects of the season. We could stand a change of focus, for sure. But that's not the main thing. Here's part of what William said: "Christmas is not about us and our efforts. It is about God and God's efforts on our behalf." Maybe by all this talk of "Putting Christ back into Christmas" we are really focusing on ourselves, on our efforts, on what we can do to make the holiday be about Jesus. But, that's not up to us. That's not our job. Christmas is not about what *we* can do. We are tempted to think that Christmas is about what we can do to keep the spirit of Christmas alive. We think that Christmas is about *us* refocusing the world on Jesus. But it's not about how *we* can go out there and make Christmas Christmas. What makes Christmas Christmas is not our efforts on God's behalf. It is

God's efforts on our behalf. Christmas is about how God chose to put on human flesh to come and dwell among us. Christmas is about God doing the impossible.

When we think about Christmas in terms of what we can do, we are putting the emphasis in the wrong place. We are over emphasizing our role in Christmas. It's really a bit self-centered to think that Christmas won't be Christmas unless *we* go out there and make it Christmas. Christmas is Christmas because of what God did for all of humanity and what God continues to do for all of humanity. Our role in that is to have the faith of Mary and say "Let it be with me according to your word." Our role is to see the hand of God at work around us, to recognize God doing the impossible. Our role is to look for God in the unexpected places – places like an older, barren woman giving birth to the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah, places like a virgin giving birth to a baby in a manger, and maybe even places like our church allowing God to work through it to do things both great and small. God is always at work in our world. It's not up to us to put Christ back into Christmas, for Christ is always there. Jesus never left Christmas. God is still at work, bringing the gift of Christ to the world among us, and sometimes even through us.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a short poem in a book entitled *The Irrational Season*. The poem says this:

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.*

It is indeed the "irrational season," where we spend time in Advent, waiting for something that has already happened, and yet happens again each year. It is the time when we set aside the logic of the world, of what can and cannot take place, and see, with the eyes of faith, God doing the impossible. It is the season for setting aside reason and instead accepting God's greatest gift of love and realizing that nothing is impossible for God.

Mary, in deep faith said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" and in doing so, she not only received the gift of God's presence in her life, but she allowed God's greatest gift to be available to us all. In this Christmas season, may we, too, allow God to work through us. May we realize that it's not about us, but about what God is doing. May we say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." Amen.