

God of the Impossible

The Rev. Dr.
Peter G. James

Luke 1:26-38

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

*“I just closed
my eyes and
said a Hail
Mary.”*

-Roger Staubach

Those from a Catholic background will recognize the prayer, “Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed art thou, among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” In Catholic parlance, it’s called the Hail Mary prayer. It’s recited ten times in quick succession as part of a prayer discipline called the rosary. The beads in the rosary serve as a convenient way to keep track of the number of Hail Mary’s prayed.

Hail Mary has another meaning. A Hail Mary is also a long pass thrown at the end of a football game. When a team desperately needs to score, the quarterback will launch a Hail Mary pass into the end zone in the hopes that a receiver will catch it.

The Hail Mary pass was made famous in a NFL playoff game in 1975. The Dallas Cowboys were playing the Minnesota Vikings. With time running out, legendary quarterback Roger Staubach threw a 50-yard desperation pass that was caught by Drew Pearson to secure the win for the Cowboys.

Afterwards, Roger Staubach said to reporters, “I just closed

my eyes and said a Hail Mary.” Staubach’s designation of the play introduced the “Hail Mary Pass” into our football lexicon. In our secular culture, I suppose more people know the meaning of a Hail Mary pass than a Hail Mary prayer.

What are we to make of mother Mary? For the most part, Catholics venerate her and Protestants ignore her.

Catholics designate Mary as the “Mother of God.” This phrase originates from the second sentence of the Hail Mary prayer that was added in 1495. “Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at our death, Amen.”

Protestants recognize Mary as the mother of Jesus but cringe at the designation of Mary as the Mother of God. At the Council of Ephesus in 431AD, Mary was described as the “theotokos” or God-bearer. Since God-bearer is an awkward phrase, Catholic tradition later interpreted it to mean “Mother of God.” In her role as Mother of God, Catholics came to regard Mary as sinless. It’s known as the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, which was officially adopted into the Catholic Church in 1854. Catholics further adhere to the

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perpetual virginity of Mary, which, to my way of thinking, gives rise to the unfortunate Catholic teaching that celibacy and chastity are higher callings than marriage.

Protestants tend to ignore Mary, primarily in reaction to the excessive level of adoration accorded her by Catholics. Nowhere is Mary represented as sinless in Scripture. Yet, Catholics rightly observe that Mary is the epitome of devotion and obedience when she says, "Let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). As such, she is worthy of our consideration and respect.

We're told at the outset of the story that Mary is engaged to be married to Joseph (1:27). Marriages were arranged between families in those days. It would have been perfectly natural for Mary and Joseph's parents to arrange for their marriage. The dowry paid at their betrothal would have sealed the deal. Their subsequent year-long engagement would enable them to become acquainted and begin building their relationship. The couple lived with their families during their engagement and refrained from sexual contact.

This betrothal period was far more binding than engagements in our day. It was a covenant that could only be broken by divorce. That's why, when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy during their engagement, he purposed in his mind to

divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:21).

The practice of arranged marriages seems foreign to western sensibilities. I recall meeting a couple years ago to talk about their approaching wedding. When I inquired about how they met, they told me, "We met at our engagement party." This was a first for me. I had never met a couple before or since who met at their engagement party. In some eastern cultures, families still pick mates for their children. This couple seemed every bit as loving and tender as couples who self-select each other. For all our talk of couples falling in love, I'm reminded that they also learn to love.

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (1:28). In older versions, greetings is translated with the word "hail." Hail in the Latin is Ave, from which we derive the phrase "Ave Maria." In Catholic circles, Ave Maria is a much-revered song about Mary's virtue.

"Greetings, favored one," is a typical first century form of address. There is no indication of any extraordinary worthiness on Mary's part. Catholics, however, read more into it. She is chosen by God for her inherent virtue. The King James Version accentuates this point: "Hail, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are

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you among women.” This last phrase is considered by scholars to be a later addition to the text. For Catholics, Mary is full of grace. She not only receives grace but in her saintly role, she bestows grace on others.

Mary is perplexed by this angelic greeting (1:29). You would be, too. Gabriel reassures her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You... will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (1:30-31). Jesus was a common first century Jewish name. In Hebrew, it’s pronounced Yeshua or Joshua, which translates, “Yahweh saves.” In Matthew’s account, the angel announces to Mary, “You will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Mary is more than a little confused. “How can this be since I am a virgin?” (1:35) How can this happen? How?

The angel says to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” In Greek mythology, gods are portrayed as having sexual relations with people on earth. There is none of that here. The phrase is simply a figurative way of saying that God will make it happen.

Luke’s gospel begins with a miraculous conception to an old couple named Zechariah and

Elizabeth. I’m struck with the similarities between these two stories. Both women are visited by the angel Gabriel. Both are able to conceive through extraordinary circumstances. Both are told they will have a son. Both are given names for their sons. Both are given the meaning behind the names. Both are told about the destiny of their sons. And both are beyond reproductive capacities—Elizabeth on account of age and Mary for reasons of abstinence.

Two miraculous pregnancies are enumerated here. An old, infertile woman will bear a child, and a young virgin shall conceive. These unlikely pregnancies are explained by verse 37: “For nothing is impossible with God.” God did the impossible in old Aunt Lizzie and God will do the same in you, Mary. Nothing is impossible with God. Nothing is beyond the scope of God’s sovereign power.

Scripture is replete with aged, infertile couples who end up giving birth to children of destiny. Abraham and Sarah are well beyond child-bearing years when an angel announces their approaching conception. Sarah laughs when this divine messenger announces the improbable news that she will have a baby at age 90. Sarah is instructed to name her child Isaac, meaning laughter. God will have the last laugh on this one. God asks them, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

“Impossible is nothing.”

(Genesis 18:14). Nothing is impossible with God.

Jesus has a conversation with a rich young ruler who attempts to justify himself by talking about his meticulous observance of the Ten Commandments. “One thing you lack,” Jesus says. “Go sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven.” Jesus knows the rich man’s money stands in the way. Jesus goes on say how hard it is for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God. This encounter shocks Jesus’ listeners. Wealth was considered a sign of God’s favor. If rich people can’t be saved, what hope is there for the rest of us? Jesus said, “With man this is impossible but not with God. All things are possible with God” (Mark 10:28).

Impossible originates from a Latin term that combines the negative prefix “in” (which becomes “im” before the letter “p”) with the word “possible.” So, literally, the word translates “not possible.” Nothing is not possible with God. Nothing is hopeless or out of the question where God is concerned.

Several years ago, Adidas ran a worldwide ad campaign featuring the quote, “Impossible is nothing.” It highlighted people who faced enormous challenges in their rise to prominence.

The “Impossible is Nothing” phrase originates from something John Maxwell wrote in

his book *The Difference Maker*. Maxwell is a popular Christian author who has written 50 books, focusing primarily on the theme of leadership.

Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live the world they’ve been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It’s an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It’s a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing.

Nothing is impossible with God. Admittedly, it’s a great line. We want to believe it, yet it almost sounds too good to be true. Maybe you’re facing an impossible situation right now and there seems no way out. God specializes in things once thought impossible.

How can fractured family members reconcile? How can people be healed of past hurts and addictions? How can we overcome damaged emotions or painful memories? How can that person ever come to the place of trusting Christ with his or her life? Nothing is impossible with God.

Jesus said to his followers, “For truly I tell you if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

