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SERMON

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# I Am the Lord's Servant

Ed Sutter



# **I Am the Lord's Servant**

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We've got a bit of a longer scripture passage for this morning as you will see in your bulletin, but I am going to focus on the middle. So, I encourage you to go read the entirety of what is listed, but allow me this morning to read from Luke 1:26-38, it says this: "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most high. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Friends, this is the word of the lord.

Well, perhaps you’ve heard this saying before: the older you get, the smarter your parents get. I have to be careful; my mom is here today. It’s a recognition that so often the very wisdom and guidance that we fought against in our youth is the foundation on which we stand in adulthood. But alas, so many parents will tell you the communication signal that connects parent and child is often filled with dead zone and bad connection – the messages don't always make it through. Age after age, era after era, time after time we reject the wisdom and experience of those that walked paths before us because we think we know better. One of the best examples of this I can think of from my life is on one of the

drives home from a grocery store or a quick errand I would drive home from some alternate route than usual. And almost without fail, some little voice in the backseat would speak up and say, "this isn't the way home, Daddy!" I know this is not the normal way, I might say, but it will still get us home. "No! This is the wrong way, Daddy!" the little voice might respond. And round and round we would go until I would have to say, well you are just going to have to trust me. We will see if we make it home or not. Our kids don't always trust us, do they? And it's that very idea that led me to one of the great privileges I have had at Westminster when I was just stepping into adulthood myself. A parent called me one afternoon and said, "well, I know my son won't always talk to me or listen to me, but I am glad he will talk to you about the things he won't bring to me." Sometimes we need to hear important messages two, or three, or seventeen times before they sink in. Sometimes we just need to hear those messages from another voice.

I suppose this dynamic is not exactly unique to parents or children, so I am sure I am not unique in the experience in running out of patience, or time, or yet another way to clarify the same thought over again. We end up saying something simply like: you just need to believe me, just trust me on this

one. You know whether it is out of ignorance, or avoidance, or lack of experience, or perspective we as a people are very good at believing that our way is the best way. That my perspective is the right one. That my view of the world is somehow uniquely accurate. And other people simply don't understand the complexity and the nuance of my experience. So often we believe our own gut reactions, good or bad, above and before even the wisest of advisors.

With that in mind, imagine the obstacle the angel Gabriel is up against when he brings Mary the news of her impending pregnancy. And to her credit, she must have attended her middle school health classes because she responds, "Wait. How?" It's an extremely reasonable question. She's just been made aware that not only will she become pregnant, but that her child is to be called the Son of the most high, that somehow he will inherit David's throne, and that there will be no end to his Kingdom, whatever that means. So yes, needless to say, this young lady has a few questions. And the answer that comes to those questions is one that I'd like for us to dwell with for a few moments. Mary hears this news, and she asks, well, how will this be? And what's the answer that comes to her? Gabriel says nothing will be impossible with God. Nothing will be impossible with God. Now, I'm sure



as we sit here today that you heard those words, you heard me speak those words, but I'm afraid that they may have become like one of those bumper sticker phrases that has sunk merely out of you from our hearts and our consciousness. So, listen to them once again with new ears, as if hearing them like Mary for the very first time. Nothing will be impossible with God. There's impact in the word nothing here, and especially when we look at it the way that it may have been used in the Greek writing. This isn't some equivocal nothing the way that I might respond if someone were to ask me what's new. Oh, nothing. This is definitive, and it's vast. No fact. No matter. No word. No message. No charge. No statement. Nothing will be impossible with God.

What does that mean for you and for me? How can we redeem those words from bumper sticker rhetoric and return them to their rightful place in our hearts and in our lives? We've got three ideas, all of which we can pick right out of the verses that we have read this morning. First, the fact that nothing will be impossible does not mean that God is a genie who grants wishes. Second, there are more possible outcomes on the table than we realize. And third, the unbelievable and the implausible might in fact be true. So, let's walk through each of those three things briefly.

First, though, some do try to treat God this way, the phrase nothing will be impossible does not mean that God is a genie. Here's how we know that from the recounting of Mary's story that we read this morning. If, like me, the extent of your knowledge of genius tops out somewhere around Disney's Aladdin, then you'll note that that sort of genie shows up on your command with the expressed intent of granting your wish. But not so for Mary. Not even close, really. Gabriel shows up, seemingly out of the blue. The day must have been so mundane and commonplace that it's not even marked by an event in her own life. Instead, we're told that the date Gabriel showed up was somewhere in Mary's cousin Elizabeth's six month of pregnancy. Mary had no plan for this. Mary had no fore knowledge of this, and Mary did not ask for this. Not only did she not ask for this visit, but Gabriel shows up with the plan already in motion. He's not there to consult with Mary. He's not there to ask her advice or grant her a wish. He's there with an irrevocable and important plan. Like it or not, you are already on board, Mary. God is not a genie who shows up on command to grant your wish. God shows up with his plans and on his time. And yes, call it for what it is. That can be quite scary. We see that in the story, verse 29 tells us that Mary was "greatly troubled at this sudden arrival", and understandably so. God's plans do catch us off guard. They may be scary, but

God is good. We see that very clearly in the life of Jesus. God is good, but God is not a genie. The second thing that we can pull from this story is that when God is involved, there are options on the table that we may never realize. When Gabriel shows up, Mary doesn't respond with, "oh, I bet I know what this is about." She has no clue what's about to happen. So yes, again, she's terrified. If she knows anything about her scriptures, she might know that when God arrives, cities rise and cities fall. The vast seas are turned into dry highways. Things are given breath and new life. Mary might know all of those things, but it sure doesn't seem like a case of sudden onset pregnancy was in her rolodex of options. So, bring it close to home now. Consider for a moment or two how that might play out in your life. The things and the messages that we tell ourselves: this marriage will never get better, or this investment is guaranteed to pay off, or I know exactly what you're going to say next. This plays out the same way every time. Here we go again. But what if there were an option that you wouldn't consider even after you'd considered all of the options? What if God just happened to be capable of a few things beyond your expectations, beyond your best guesses, and above any degree of wisdom or experience that you may have? The fact of the matter is that the moment you allow for God to enter the equation, you simply do not know what will

happen next. That leads me to our final of these three points this morning. When God is in the mix, the implausible, the impractical, the unbelievable, and yes, even the impossible might in fact be true. There are plenty of instances in a life of faith where logic will fail us, but in this case, doesn't it stand to reason that the creator of the universe, the architect of breath, the author of physics, the think tank that invented thought, doesn't it stand to reason that God in fact could do something that we've never before considered? And it might not even be a matter of possible versus impossible. But perhaps God does something that we, up to this point, don't even have the capacity to consider. Imagine trying to explain water before there was water. Imagine describing light before there was light. Imagine trying to consider or conceive of chocolate, or vanilla, or sex, or life, or death, or babies, or old people before any of those things existed. That's the sandbox that God plays in. That's the palette with which God creates.

I think that's why Gabriel responds the way that he does when Mary inquires about exactly how all of this is to happen. Mary asks, "well how will this be?" And Gabriel, in verse 34, says, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will over shadow you." In other words, God is going to show up. Enough said. When God shows up,

things happen. And it's worth noting that Gabriel doesn't give a precise or practical answer to her question. He simply gives her the reassurance of God's presence that with God nothing is impossible. There's a very important point extended there that I don't want to gloss over this morning. With God. His statement is that nothing is impossible with God. Let me be crystal clear. He doesn't say nothing will be impossible with a healthy endowment, or with the right staff, or with the best music, or with the right social media presence, or with the best programming. Yes, Westminster, I know you and I'm speaking to you. The list of impossible is countless without God. But nothing will be impossible with God. If you want to see growth, if you want to see lives changed, if you want to see connection and relationship and purpose and vitality, then you had best be sure to align your life and community with where God is leading, not where you wish God was leading. But where is he is leading? My sense is that when Gabriel showed up, Mary perhaps wished all sorts of things for her life that weren't the case. Consider then, the power of her response to this unbelievable and life-upending news. What does she say when she finds out all that is to come? I am the Lord's servant, she says. Imagine if that were your response. For whatever news God has for your life: I'm your servant, Lord. Imagine if that were the response that this church had for wherever God

was leading. We are your servants, Lord. Friends, I'm going to repeat myself one last time. Don't believe it simply because I've repeated a bunch of times but believe it because the story of God in all of creation repeats this message countless times, every single second. We see it in the stars, and we see it in the sand. We see it in gravity and in sunshine. We see it in oceans and in the clouds. We perceive it in our minds, and we feel it in our hearts. And we see it in the life of a child who was born of a woman conceived by the Holy Spirit, who came to be God with us. Emmanuel. Nothing will be impossible with God. We are your servants, Lord. Amen.





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