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Title: Christmas Promises: Hope

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Scripture: [Romans 15:12-13](#), [Isaiah 7:14](#), [Isaiah 11:1-9](#)

Text: [Luke 1:26-38](#)

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I collect Christmas stories. That shouldn't surprise you. Every preacher does. They help us preach on the familiar. If there are more familiar passages of scripture than Christmas stories, I don't know what they are. You can almost recite the passage read early. We use stories about Christmas to help you reconnect with a familiar

story in a new one.

One of my favorite stories is told by a colleague of mine. It's about his 5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Hannah, who were participating in a nativity play at school. Hannah was playing Mary, and Olivia played an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room proclaiming to all who could hear him, "I'm a sheep." Then asking, "What are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel.

The boy then turned to Hannah, who was still struggling to get into her costume with her mother's help. He repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Hannah simply said, "I'm Mary."¹

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, the boy felt he needed to justify his role. "It's hard being a sheep, you know," he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part. Hannah's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Hannah innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know." Well, yes, it is hard being a virgin; it is even harder being a teenage mother. Scholars tell us that when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary she was a young teenager, maybe only 13 or 14 years old.

Think about when you were a young teenager. It doesn't matter if it was just a few years or decades ago, you remember because there is nothing like the years of early adolescence. Your body is growing, changing, on an emotional roller coaster. You are awkward physically and socially, filled with questions

about life and the people around you. You remember because the memories of those days just don't go away.

Put yourself in Mary's place. You're 14 and suddenly, a strange person looking beautiful and angelic appears and says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28) What would you do? I would have run as fast I could to get out of there. How about you? In your awkward, unsure of teenage self, would you have stayed around? Maybe you'd be frozen with fear. Mary was because, "The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'" (Luke 1:30). That's not so bad. Favor with God is good news. But then the other shoe drops. There is a prize for finding favor with God. "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus..." (Luke 1:31).

You know how Mary responds. "No way. I am a virgin. How can this be?" Gabriel says, "Nothing is impossible for God." (Luke 1:37). God can do this. Everyone said your cousin Elizabeth was too old to have a baby. Look at her. Nothing is impossible for God. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." "...God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." (Luke 1:35,32) "Nothing is impossible for God." "Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

I don't know what you make of this story? You had years to think about it. You likely have an opinion. Some people believe Mary was obedient. "Here am I...let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Maybe you've heard that interpretation. Maybe you were taught that in Sunday school. A friend who went to parochial schools once said to me. "The nun told me when I was in 7th grade that I needed to be obedient, like Mary." That's because you were 14 and disobedient. That's what 14-year-olds do. What 14-year-old is obedient? Was it obedience? Pregnant is pregnant and it doesn't sound as if she can do anything about it. Obedient? No.

Some people say it is a statement of faith. "Here am I...let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) They think, Mary, is the mother of faith, the model of faithfulness and certainly she is. She never leaves Jesus and walks to the cross with him. She takes him down and places Jesus in his grave. She was there when the church was born, with the disciples. That's faith. But all of that faith is after the fact, not before conception, not before birth. In this story, nothing at all is said about Mary's faith. God chose her, found favor in her, not because she was faithful. Gabriel doesn't say, "Because of your faith, you won!" We don't know why God chose Mary. God

just says, "Mary's the one" and she says, "Here am I...let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)²

What would make her say that? I don't think it is obedience or faith. I believe it is hope. Mary says, "Yes, okay, let it be as you say" because of hope. Look carefully and you will see it. Start by underlining "according to your word" and then, go back and see what that means.

It means that Mary has hope in the promise of God. Seven hundred and fifty years before Gabriel stood in front of Mary, God made a promise through the prophet Isaiah saying "A young woman shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7: 14b). Mary knows this and knows that "...a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse..." (Isaiah 11:1a) and that a son will be born, given, and he will be named "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom." (Isaiah 9:6b-7a)

This promise was the hope of God's people, year after year, decade after decade, century after century. Someday, a virgin would conceive from the house of Jesse, a son given who would bring endless peace. They waited, hopeful. They believed the promises of Isaiah. By the first century, they were so filled with hope that one of the most popular names for parents to call their son was Joshua, which means Jehovah Saves--in Aramaic, Jesus. Mary grew up in that culture, knew these prophecies, and shared the hope of a Messiah.

Now, look back at what Gabriel says to her. "...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus... called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David... and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1: 31-33) If Mary had a scriptural list in her head of the hope of God's people, the promises that Isaiah made about a Messiah, Gabriel places a checkmark by each prophecy. When Mary says, "let it be according to your word" it was because of hope. Mary has hope that the promises of God will be fulfilled through her.

According to your word means hope in the promise of God...and it means hope in the power of God. Look again at what Gabriel says. Mary says "How can this be?" Do you remember what the angel says? "Nothing is impossible for God." (Luke 1:37) "Nothing is impossible for God" seems to me to be the clincher in this story. Mary says, "Okay, count me in. Let it be, according to your word." With "nothing is impossible," Gabriel closes the deal.

There is a reason. Nothing is impossible for God is found twice in the Bible. Do you know the other time? It's an old story, similar but a little different than this one. Mary knew it; everyone knew it. It's about an old couple, really old, feeling like they were at the end of their lives. Instead of growing, hormonal, awkward, and unsure like a 14-year-old, they were declining, post-menopausal, and stumbling in their old age. Three messengers of the Lord came to them, not one. Maybe one was Gabriel; the story doesn't say. The message is the same. "You will conceive and bear a son." Do you remember what Sarah does? She laughs. God says to Abraham, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord? (Genesis 18:14a). No. Nothing. Nothing is impossible for God.³

Mary knew that story. Mary knew that Abraham and Sarah conceived and Sarah bore a son and because nothing was impossible for God, the great nation of Israel was born.

Mary knew that if Sarah had not conceived at age 90, she would not be sitting there, a Jewish girl in the first century, listening to Gabriel says "Nothing is impossible with God." It was as if Gabriel was saying, "You are alive aren't you? There is a reason. Abraham and Sarah conceived in their old age. Sarah had a baby at 90. Is anything too difficult for God? No. I don't think so. A virgin pregnant. "...nothing is impossible with God."

Do you know that? Do you know that nothing is impossible with God? Do you have that hope? Hope is the first promise of Christmas and we see it when a teenage girl becomes the handmaiden of God. Since that moment 9 months before the birth of Jesus, people have the opportunity to claim the hope of Christmas as their own, to have hope in the promises of God and hope in the power of God.

Hope in the promises of God, believes that God's promises are true and that one day The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them (Isaiah 11:6), all of this because of a little child. Impossible? No, because "Nothing is impossible for God." (Luke 1:37) That's hope in the power of God.

Because of this truth, years later Paul wrote us a Christmas card. Maybe it can be your first Christmas card this year. Use a little imagination and you can see it. On the outside. "The root of Jesse shall come..." Then, open it up and on the inside "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)

Does anybody here need that? I do. We all do because our hearts were created for hope. The human spirit survives on hope. Hope is an essential ingredient for living and thriving. We need hope but let's face it, this past year, hope has taken a back seat to a pandemic, an election, social unrest, fires and hurricanes, unemployment, and food lines. It's been hard to have hope. But this is the Good news. The first promise of Christmas tells us that "nothing is impossible for God."

If this is indeed true, and surely it is (for if it was not, we would not be sitting here in this worship) if nothing is indeed impossible for God, then our greatest needs can become our greatest hopes. God can find a cure, heal a broken nation, knit reconciliation, renew the environment, and feed the hungry. God can and will because "nothing is impossible for God."

I pray that you will own that, claim that because it's hard right now. It's hard being a sheep, hard being a virgin, hard being you and me. It's just hard being us. We all need hope, a hope that is so real that it fills you with joy and peace. You can find; it's here, in the first promise of Christmas.

¹ "An Announcement to a Virgin", King Duncan retrieved by subscription at sermons.com

² Craddock, Fred. Luke. Interpretation, p. 27-28.

³ The connection between Sarah and Mary is from Craddock, Fred B. (2011-04-13). The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (p. 146). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition