



Luke 1:26-38

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Hello! For those of you who are joining us for the first time, online or in person here, my name is David Woolverton. I'm one of the pastors here and it's a real joy for me to share with you the word of God today as we prepare our hearts. Would you go before the Lord with me and let us pray together? Gracious Lord, open us up to your word and open your word up to us. Teach us, Lord, what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All this, Father, I pray in Jesus mighty name, Amen.

So, we've been talking in this series, Radical Hospitality, about how God has been uniquely wiring this encounter with angels to remind us that what God is doing is larger than what's happening in our own individual lives. Radical hospitality is about making space and having that space be transformative.

So, I have a question for you. We've been sharing - or at least, I've been sharing - personal experiences in hotels with regards to hospitality. So, two weeks ago, I talked with you about exit plans and how these things are posted in your hotel room, and it sounds really humorous that you don't get to the "don't panic" part until the very end of the list of all things that make you want to panic. But I have a question for you right now. How many of you travel with your pets? Your dogs, your cats? Ok, there are a couple of you who do. You know, the idea of traveling with our dog, Sophie, well, that's just not vacation for me. If you had any experience with our dog, you would agree. I mean, my idea of vacation is actually getting away from my dog. So yeah, the reality is that there are hotels out there that actually cater to your pets. Some of them are Airbnb's, some of them you find on these sites where you take over the whole house. And so, they accommodate your pets. Some of the high-end hotels, not that we stayed in them, but I did some research, even they go above and beyond - for a fee, of course. They'll provide snacks to greet your pet. They do that for us, too, for a fee. But for your pet, they get snacks, they have dog walkers (for a fee), and they have

individuals who will bathe your pet for you. They have individuals who will, shall I say this diplomatically, clean up your dog's *stuff*. Yeah, they had that service available, for a fee. But it's that hospitality for our pets that made me think, as I'm reading through this Christmas story again, it made me think about what would it be like if we told the Christmas story from the perspective of the animals? Wouldn't that change our vantage point a little bit? Well, think about it. Jesus was born in a stable, probably historically a cave, but it was an animal's cave. And Jesus, once He was born, was placed in a manger. Some animals had to give up their space. Did they know? Did they understand that the creator of the universe was somehow placed into their arena of care? Did they get that? That's not where I'm going with this message, but the reality of radical hospitality is that it encompasses all aspects of the Christmas story. And what I want to do is I want to revisit the encounter that Mary had with Gabriel, the angel, but on a deeper level and I will ask slightly different questions.

If you remember a couple of weeks ago when we started this series, we asked you to consider that God's invitation to Mary and to us was an invitation for us to be God-bearers, to take Jesus with us wherever we went, into whatever encounter that we had. To take Jesus with us into our schools, into our workplaces, into our neighborhoods, into our families. What would it be like if we, the followers of Jesus, were actually God-bearers just like Mary? And if we applied that principle, what we learned a couple of weeks ago was that for Mary, God first bestowed his favor on her. That's step one. God's favor is a gift. It's not earned. It's not deserved. It's not demanded. It's given. That's the picture of God's grace at work.

John Wesley, who is the founder of the Methodist movement that eventually partnered with others and became the United Methodist Church, would have called that *prevenient grace* - something that happens before we're aware of it. That's God's favor that comes in advance. That came to Mary. It's coming to us. God's favor precedes God's invitation, an invitation to do whatever it is that God is asking us to do. It's partnering with him. And in this, there's a larger mission that God has in mind. Mary received that invitation through an angel, Gabriel. And from the invitation we read that God overshadowed Mary. And He overshadows us, and that overshadowing reminds us that what God is birthing in us is larger and more important than even our own life. Now, what God is doing in the world is something pretty significant, and we get to be a part of that, but it's not about us. It's about what God is doing. And once the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary and overshadows us, God sends us out into the world to be ambassadors, envoys of hope and new life, of forgiveness, of grace. It's hard to imagine. It's hard to do, just as it was for Mary. And when we look at it from Joseph's perspective, which we did two weeks ago. We learned that the radical power behind hospitality is in the word sacrifice. What Joseph had to give up in order for God's plan to take place and what we redefined in that word was that sacrifice was an addition word; that fundamentally, it was not about giving up something, but giving toward something or

someone. Joseph did that. He sacrificed so much in order to give toward what God was doing, to give toward what Mary needed. That was a sacrifice.

Today I want to take us back into that passage of Gabriel and Mary and invite you to consider that God was doing something else as well. He was revealing his heart. So, I want to invite you to turn with me to Luke Chapter one. If you brought your Bible or your Bible app, I am going to put these verses up onto the screen for those of you who are watching at home as well as in this room. And let's listen together as God speaks to us. And I invite you to listen to this word and to read this word with an openness to hearing something new. Let's look together. Luke 1:26 says, "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named whose name was Joseph of the House of David. The virgin's name was Mary, and he came to her and said, Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you. But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God, and now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor, David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom. There will be no end." Mary said to the angel, How can this be since I am a virgin? The angel said to her, 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. And now your relative, Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren for nothing will be impossible with God. Then Mary said, here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me, according to your word. Then the angel departed from her."

Powerful story, powerful words. And some of those words are more powerful than others. Just in these last couple of verses, there are several words that when I was reading it just this past week stood out and they were crying out to me to be heard. I want to share those words with you. The first word is the word *barren*. When you take that word out of its context, that word really rips my heart out. That word is a word that is filled with vacuum, emptiness. Like somebody was craving something and could not get it. We know in the story that this word is actually applying to Elizabeth. That's a story that's still part of the Christmas legacy that happens earlier in chapter one of Luke's gospel. Elizabeth and her husband, Zachariah, had been craving a child for years, and decades have gone by and she's still childless. And here, in her old age, she has given up hope. Barren. That's a word that's describing her. I wonder, does that describe anybody else here? Barren is not just about pregnancy or lack of pregnancy. It's about an emptiness in a person's life where promises made have not been fulfilled. Does that impact anybody else here? There's another word in this story, and that's the word *nothing*. That word by itself, apart from this context, literally means nothing. No thing. Nothing also carries with it the weight of

emptiness. Sometime in our culture, we feel that don't we? The weight that something is missing from your life. Maybe you're approaching life as if you have no reason to live or you have nothing to speak of. Your identity has been pulled out; your provisions have been taken from you. Maybe you don't even have a home. Maybe you don't have a job. Maybe your whole identity has been shaken by this word, *nothing*. There's another word and that's that word *impossible*. Impossible. By itself, apart from the context of these verses, that word also creates a picture of vacuum, of emptiness, of hopelessness. Especially if you're looking forward to something, the impossible breaks down our hope. Maybe you're here and you've heard bad news and you've struggled with diagnoses or loved ones who have had really difficult diagnoses, like I have. And you're hearing that word - impossible. And you're hearing it, and you're feeling it in the midst of that vacuum. Three words. They're just words, right? But the words are powerful. *Barren. Nothing. Impossible*. Out of its context, they tear us apart from the story. But there are two other words in these verses that also stand out. They are the words *with God. With God*. You know, the interesting thing about those two words is that they remind us of the other parts of the Christmas story. Both Mary and Joseph were, we're told by the angel Gabriel, that they were to name this child Jesus, which in Hebrew is Yeshua, and it literally means God saves. *God saves*. Part of the story that we've been told is that Jesus metaphorically was also to be named Emmanuel, which means God with us. Almost as if God, knowing the barrenness of the world at this particular point in history was reminding those people of something new, something about to happen that would take on a whole different way of interpreting *barren, nothing and impossible*. Suddenly these words take on new life when you put them back into the context. Look at those words of the verses. Once again, verse 36. And now Gabriel says to Mary "Your relative, Elizabeth, in her old age has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren, for nothing will be impossible with God. Oh, my gosh. Now you have barren nothing and impossible, put into a different context, and they create a wonderful soil in which something new can arise. A hope. A new birth. Because we serve a God of the impossible. Who does not allow barrenness or nothingness to define. Gods God-ness.

So I wonder, who is feeling that barren, and that nothing, and that impossible, right now? What this Christmas story reminds us is that the God of the impossible is not limited by our barrenness, is not restricted by our nothingness. He's the God of the impossible. With God, He makes streams of living water come flowing in the desert. That's what we read in the Old Testament. This is the God who creates order out of chaos and births out of nothingness. What could that God of the impossible do in your life? The challenge is, are we willing to allow him to?

So, when you take this one step further and look at Mary's response to the God of the impossible, this is what she says. In verse 37 we read, "For nothing will be impossible with

God. Then Mary said, verse 38, Here, am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me, according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. Notice that the angel does not leave until Mary connects the dots. Until Mary acknowledges why. Because as we discovered a couple of weeks ago, God is not a slave trader. He's not demanding that Mary does his bidding. He invites her. She has the freedom to choose. This incredible teenager, this middle school kid, says yes and goes on to change the world. And who do we, at least in the Protestant faith, who do we hear more of? We hear more of her son. Literally, she embodies what we read elsewhere in Scripture. Greater is the one that is in you than those who are in the world. The God of the impossible has spoken. The God of the impossible has stepped into barrenness, stepped into nothingness, stepped into, and overshadowed, the impossible. And he has birthed something new. And he can do that again in us. He can do that in you. He can do that in you.

So, I wonder, what would it take for us to say what Mary said? Here am I, a servant of the Lord. I live at the pleasure of the most high, God. And when we do, we truly engage the radical hospitality of the Christmas story.

Are you feeling barren? Are you feeling like nothing? Are you facing the impossible? The God of the impossible is birthing something new!

Let's pray. God, I thank you that you are not limited in any way by our limitations, that you are not thwarted by our barrenness, our brokenness, our nothingness. You laugh at the impossible and by your presence, you heal, you restore, and you bring hope. Speak that new word of hope in us and allow Jesus to come alive through us!

As we pray in his mighty name. Amen.