

Luke 1:26-55 “God Bless the Courageous Women!”

The National Vital Statistics System has been tracking the average age of first-time moms. They’ve concluded that the *average age* of first-time moms is increasing. In 1970 the average was 21.4 years. Now it’s 26.3 years. There are a lot of theories as to why this is the case: Women are delaying having children to complete their educational and vocational training. People are waiting longer to get married. In today’s market and economy it takes longer to achieve financial stability. The theory that the National Center for Health Statistics seems to favor is that there are fewer first-time teenage moms. But remember, in Biblical days it wasn’t uncommon at all for first-time moms to be in their teens simply because they took husbands at an early age.

So imagine, if you will, a woman in the ancient world whose greatest desire was to have children. Now imagine if at age 18, after trying hard to conceive ... no pregnancy. At twenty, still no pregnancy. At twenty-five she’s beginning to feel anxious. By thirty, that anxiety has turned into shame. She prays and prays, but still no pregnancy. She feels like she’s a disappointment to her husband and her extended family. She’s probably asking, “Where are you God? Could you help a sister out?” At forty ... long past child-bearing years in the ancient world, her hope begins slipping away and wonders why she should even bother to continue praying. Now imagine her sense of loss and regret at age fifty.

This is the story of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. We find it in the book of Genesis. Finally at the age of 99, which far exceeds the lifespan of anyone living in the ancient world, she gives birth to Isaac. I’m not going to go into detail or get into a debate about the accuracy or probability that Sarah was, in fact, almost 100 years old when she had Isaac. The point of the story is, long past the time that Sarah’s supply of hope was running on empty, she finally received what she had been longing for all her life.

Cut to a story from New Testament times that is similar in many ways. In Luke's gospel, we read the story of Elizabeth who was married to a priest named Zechariah. Like Sara, she prayed for a child, but as each year passed, her hopes started fading. She and Zechariah continued to pray until one day when Zechariah was doing the things that was expected of him as a priest, he had this vision of an angel from God. The angel's message was, "Zechariah ... you will finally get the son that you and Elizabeth have been praying for!" And sure enough, Elizabeth gave birth to a son and they named him John. Zechariah just couldn't believe it. Two people past their prime for having children finally get to be parents! They had long given up hope, and the price Zechariah had to pay for that lack of hope was that he wouldn't be able to speak until John was born.

I think that the stories of Sarah and Elizabeth help illustrate the experience of the Jewish people. The prophets inspired them to hold on to their desires, hopes, and dreams for a better day. The prophets' message was, "I know you're feeling discouraged, but remember the lesson of Abraham and Sarah. Just when you think that hope has run out, just when you think that you've done everything you could do and prayed everything you could pray, you can still receive the blessings you were promised!

How many of you have ever experienced disappointment? Wow. That's a lot of people. How about frustration? Anyone ever dealt with that? Okay, how about impatience? Anyone want to admit to that? Here's a harder one. Anyone ever experience despair? We've all been in that boat before. We all feel like maybe we're capable of giving birth to something good and beautiful that would benefit the world, but then our potential goes unfulfilled which often destroys our hopes.

But then ... the impossible happens.

See, Elizabeth had a younger cousin. And her name was ...? Mary was engaged, but not yet married. She was also a descendant of the great

King David of Israel whose legacy inspired hopes for the Messiah and how the Messiah would restore the Kingdom of Israel to its former glory. When Elizabeth was about 6 months pregnant, her cousin Mary received a visit from the same Angel that visited Zechariah. “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you ... blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” (I learned that one from my wife who grew up Catholic!) And Mary was confused. Maybe a little scared too. But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid! You’re going to conceive and have a son.” “How’s that going to work?” asked Mary. “I’m a virgin.” The angel said, “The child will be conceived by the power of God. Nothing is impossible with God.”

Now here’s where I want to caution you: People tend take two opposite extremes when dealing with the story of the miracle of Sarah’s pregnancy at age 100 and Mary’s virgin birth. The one extreme is to stake your “faith” ... sorry that’s wrong ... the one extreme is to stake your *religion* on the *accuracy* of these stories. Sort of that old “If you can’t accept these stories as 100% factual truth, then you make Jesus a liar and nothing else in the bible is true and you can throw the whole thing out.” (At the risk of burning in hell right?) The other extreme is to completely dismiss these stories and just keep on rolling all the while treating the Bible as nothing but a collection of moral stories and believing that Jesus is just a wandering, radical Rabbi who had some cool things to say about being a good person and some scary things that really don’t apply to our day and age so we don’t have to worry about it.

Do not dismiss these stories. Yes ... they blur the lines between what is possible and what *we* think is *impossible*. But ... what if that’s the point? What if that’s what makes these stories so powerful ... what make scripture itself so powerful? Think about it: Do you think there will ever be a time when we’ll beat our swords into plowshares? Do you think there will ever be a time when predatory people who are in power ... the lions ... will lie down in peace with the vulnerable and poor ... the lambs? When God’s justice flows like a river even to the most God-forsaken places on Earth? Where the broken-hearted’s wounds would

be healed, the poor receive good news, and *all* will eat together at the welcome table be they Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, or whoever? Where love will overcome hate? “Oh come on Jesse. That will never happen. That’s just a dream. We can only hope. That may be our desire, but really ... what are the chances that these things will happen. Have you not been reading the news lately? Have you not been paying attention to what is happening in our own country let alone the world? Grow up and be realistic.

It sure seems like we’re moving in the opposite direction from all these biblical hopes, dreams, and expectations doesn’t it? Well you know what? Maybe it’s not too late for something beautiful to be born. Maybe it’s not too soon either. Maybe the present moment is ... *pregnant* with possibilities that we can’t even see or imagine.

Speaking of which ... here we have these three pregnancy stories in front of us this morning. And no matter how we interpret their “factual” status, they’re a challenge for all of us. Dare to hope! Just like Sara. Just like Elizabeth. Just like Mary. Have hope that the seemingly impossible is possible. These stories challenge us to align our lives around the “impossible possibilities” that are hidden in the present moment.

I find it interesting that in scripture you read about God calling people like Moses and Jeremiah and Jonah to go deliver a message to God’s people. And quite often their response sounds something like, “Oh, I don’t know ... I’m slow of speech and stumble over my words,” or “I’m too young and nobody will listen to me” or in the case of Jonah, “No! In fact I’m going to run away and hide and you will *never* find me!” Spoiler alert – That didn’t work out so well for ol’ Jonah. Listen ... you know who says, “Okay, I hear you ... let’s do this?” Women like Sarah, and Elizabeth and Mary! *Courageous* women who are asked to do seemingly impossible things like bringing children into the world who will establish nations and who will usher in God’s reign, and who will save the world from its own sin and stupidity!

So as far as the story of Jesus is concerned (because that's what this Advent Season is all about), from the very start, we see Mary presenting herself to the Holy Spirit to receive and cooperate with God's creative power. She surrenders, and she receives. She nurtures and gives her all. Because ... she *dares to believe that the impossible is possible*. And before we think that Jesus sort of went off and did his own thing apart from his parents and that he was so focused on the mission of his Heavenly Father that there wasn't *really* anything significant that he learned from his Earthly parents, I want to throw this out on the table: Jesus modeled the same self-surrender and receptivity to God *as his mother*. And throughout his ministry he consistently preferred the insightful kindness of motherhood to the violent blindness of statehood.

How's that for what it means to be alive in the adventure of Jesus? We present ourselves to God ... our bodies, our stories, our futures, our possibilities, even our limitations. "Here I am" we say along with Mary, "the Lord's servant. Let it be with me according to your will."