

Luke 1:26-38
Extraordinary from the Ordinary
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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God expects way more from you (in a good way) than you do from yourself. I'm just going to let that statement sink in a bit.

Does that thought cause you to squirm a bit? Does it cause your countenance to fall, make you sad? Does it put your defenses up? Hey man, I thought God was all grace and love. Before you go off into your thoughts and check out from the sermon, allow me to say a bit more.

When you think about yourself and the expectations you have for your life, does it look like the experience we tend to have during the holidays? There is so much to do and so little time to do it, you know I'm just trying to survive the holidays. In your life of faith do you come to church with the expectation that things will just vaguely be ok, and next week the same, and the week after that, same. Then one day you'll pass to the next life and maybe finally things will be better.

What I want to suggest is that, perhaps the most extraordinary thing about our expectations as followers of Jesus is how extraordinarily low they are.

I'll ask this question of us: what do we expect of this group of people all gathered together? What do we imagine God might do with us as a community? This is a very valuable question to ask, it's one that our session is wrestling with right this moment, but it's especially important to ask this time of year at Christmas.

Today we are going to look at a story in which God does, what is perhaps the most extraordinary thing ever through the most ordinary person imaginable. So I invite you now, as you are able, to stand with me for the reading of the Gospel, from Luke 1 beginning at verse 26.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[a] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[b] ³⁵ 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^[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."³⁸ 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.

I asked you to begin this morning by thinking about yourself. Now I'd like for you to think about the young woman described in the reading, Mary. Consider her background: she is not from a special family or lineage. In the gospel narrative, it tells us that Joseph, her betrothed, was from the house of David—which if you were a Jew was pretty much the best family to be a part of. But Mary has no special ancestry. She was, it's safe to say, a peasant.

The second thing we know about her is the town she came from. What town was it? Nazareth. Do you remember the stories in the Old Testament about Nazareth? Of course not, because there aren't any. In fact, historical records don't identify Nazareth as a place of note until sometime in the third century BC. There was a very famous trade route that went right through Israel between Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea called the *Via Maris*, it is what connected the civilizations to the north like the Assyrians, the Babylonians and others to the Egyptian empire and the continent of Africa. Nazareth is 5 miles off of the highway. No one knew about it, and no one cared about it.

Elsewhere in the New Testament when Nazareth is mentioned, one the person speaking says this: "can anything good come from Nazareth?" No one expected anything, let alone anything good, to come from Nazareth. That's the second thing we know about her.

The third thing we know about her is that she is a girl. In the first century in Palestine what was expected of a girl was as low as could be. This is not news to you, and tragically this thinking is still around in some places even today. There is a sad Rabbinical prayer that was spoken among Jewish priests that goes like this: Thank you God that I was not born a Gentile, I was not born a slave, and I was not born a girl.

And why I point your attention to these three characteristics of Mary is to make the point that no one could have had a lower expectation for their part in God's work in the world than Mary. She was a believer, yes; but when it came to imagining what part she might play in his work, she could never imagine that she would have a significant role in that work.

I want you to think of your situation once again, and I want you to think about the expectations you bring with you into this room each and every week, about what this life of faith might look like for you, and what your role in God's work in the world might look like.

In my opinion, a great number of people who walk in doors like this week in and week out have very low expectations for their role in God's work in the world. And that they, like Mary, if confronted by an angel who had come to share good news would respond like Mary: "How can this be?"

As I mentioned last week, one of the things that happens when we lose hope in the dreams that God places in our lives—the way Elizabeth and Zechariah did—is we settle for small dreams, for comfort over purpose, for leisure instead of adventure.

Eugene Peterson talks about the double-edged sword of Scripture. Listening to God's voice in our lives has the capacity to intensify a passion for excellence and purpose, combining it with an indifference to human notoriety. The Greeks called this way of life *arête*. Excellence and purpose comes from faith, from being more interested in God than in self, and has almost nothing to do with achievement.

Example from our family over the last 8 years.

This is the moment that we meet Mary. The God of the Cosmos who spoke the world into being has made this plan be totally dependent upon this ordinary girl from a town that no one expected anything from.

Who is this God? This is a good practice to engage in every once and a while. Because we are often tempted to think that God does his greatest work through larger than life characters. We think that looks for the best, most gifted, most willing and able-bodied people to do his great work. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is 150% true that God almost always does his greatest work through terribly ordinary and unsuspecting individuals. Do you believe me?

Abram and Sarai – nearly 100 years old and God says to them, I'm going to make you the parents of a great nation and your descendants will be as numerous as the sands of the seashore. God does extraordinary things through ordinary people.

Trapped in Egypt, held by the most powerful ruler in the world – who does God choose? M-m-m-M-Moses. He gets a guy who can't speak to go and talk to Pharaoh to convince him to let Moses lead the people out of slavery. Why? Because God does extraordinary things through ordinary people.

Gideon—The people are freed and there is an enemy that is bearing down on them who is way bigger than they could ever defeat. God goes to a guy from a nobody family, who is hiding in a winepress because he's so afraid. And God says, you're my guy. Why? Because God does extraordinary things with ordinary people

David—The little brother who is anointed King. Samuel meets all of David's other brothers, none of them were the anointed. He must have thought, perhaps I'm not hearing this call correctly because God's not choosing any of these. But there was one more youngest brother off playing Xbox, no just kidding he was tending sheep. And when he brings him before him Samuel says that is God's choice to lead and rule over his people.

Do you see the pattern? **Are you willing to see the pattern for you?** How will we see ourselves? Will we see ourselves as those who can't or won't do much. Or will we see ourselves as God sees us, as ordinary people called to do extraordinary things by an even more extraordinary God.

And how does God see us? When God looks at us, how does God see us? As clay jars. Do you know this image from the New Testament? In the New Testament Paul writes that God chooses to do his most extraordinary work by entrusting his message in vessels as jars of clay. God could use type in the world, he's God. He doesn't choose Gold or Silver, or Ivory, or Marble, or Alabaster. But instead God uses the image of the very most ordinary vessel around, the one that would have been present in every single home, clay jars, to demonstrate that the surpassing power comes not from us but from God.

Do you need to have special power, like a religious superhero, to be used by God? Absolutely not, all you need is a willingness to believe that God's intention for your life is that it would not be all about you. This is the very worst way you can go through life, making it all about you. Living a life for others in love, to be someone who helps those in need, who lets light shine through their

actions, who moves towards those who are trapped, and with God's power releases others. To be someone who is not always looking out for their own wants, but who are more interested in what they can give to others, this is a life of great joy, and this is what it looks like to be a candidate for God's work in your life.

If God can use Mary, then God can use anybody at all. And we are all anybody at all.

So, what should we do? I see two options:

1. The "if only" option.
2. The "here am I" option.

The option that Mary takes, which is the correct option for us. This is the "Here am I" option. This is the one that says "this is where God has placed me here and now, this is who I am, and this is what God is saying to me. Here am I, let it be according to your will."

What is the word that God is giving me? How do I know what I'm supposed to do. Here's what God's will is for your life, plainly written out in the Scriptures for you to see.

Matthew 5-7 (These chapters have literally dozens of specific things you can do that are God's will for your life.)

Ephesians 2:10 **For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 **For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.**

What would it look like if we did this more and more in our lives? What would change? In just a moment we are going to have a moment of silence. We're doing this as a unique and different Advent practice in order to cultivate a quiet heart at a time of year that is so frenzied. Advent is the season in which we remember the coming of Jesus into the world 2000 years ago and the challenging circumstances which he came, but it is also a chance to look forward in anticipation to his return when God will set this broken and chaotic world to rights. We are the instruments, like jars of clay that God uses to achieve God's purposes. So during this time of silence what would need to change, what would need to increase for you to be open to God's will unfolding in your life.

There is nothing that God cannot do with those who are willing to say, as Mary did, Here am I.