

**The Subjunctive Space**

Christmas Eve Day

no AtG

December 24, 2023

**Scripture: Luke 1:26-38**

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>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. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>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.

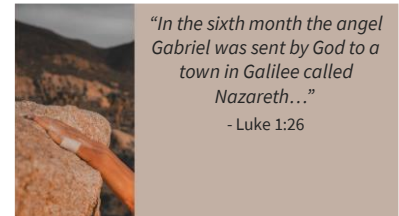


Welcome to the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent! We are almost to Christmas Eve. In fact, the day has arrived! This morning we inch closer to the heart of the Christmas story as Jesus' birth

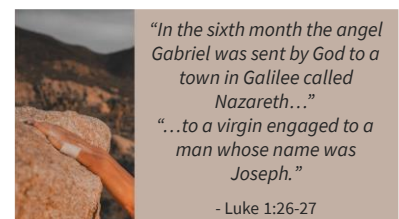
is foretold through the relationship of Mary and Elizabeth. These two cousins are central to the story. Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus' ministry, then John's mother Elizabeth sets the stage for Jesus' mother, Mary.

While there are significant differences between Elizabeth and Mary – age, marital status, circumstances – the plot twists revealed through these women both show the miraculous nature of God’s work in our world. As we prepare to walk with these two women, let us begin with a word of prayer...

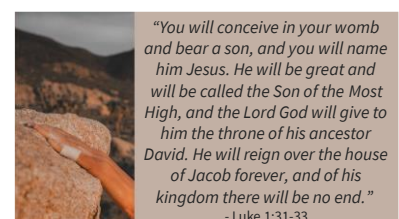
In our opening verse we read, *“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth...”* Now, the sixth month is not June. Well, it is, but that is not what Luke means. He means it is the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. The text about John the Baptist’s birth proceeds our text for today. It was just over six months ago that the angel visited Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah, letting him know that his wife would soon be with child. That was the day that Zechariah was struck mute too – because he doubted the angel Gabriel’s words. You couldn’t really blame him though. Elizabeth was well-advanced in age. She had been barren all of her life. Yet, through Elizabeth’s story, we get our first lesson that nothing is impossible with God.



Continuing into verse 27 we read, *“to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph.”* That virgin, of course, would be Mary. Just as Gabriel announced something incredible to

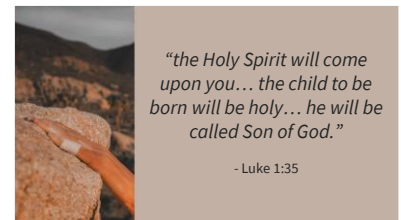


Zechariah, here too the angel shares some incredible news. Mary first hears these words: *“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”* She is as you and I would be: perplexed, confused, afraid. What could this greeting possibly mean? Gabriel reassures her and then continues, saying, *“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”*

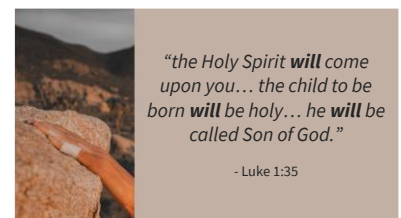
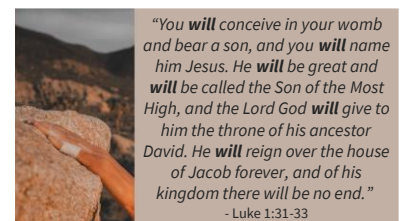


*He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*” To be visited by an angel is hard to wrap one’s mind around. But can you imagine, just for a second, hearing these words as a 13- or 14-year-old girl, unwed at that? All that Mary can do at this moment is to stammer out a “How?”

If it were me standing there in Mary’s shoes in Nazareth, I do not think the ‘how’ would have helped my confusion and fear in the least bit. Gabriel tells her that *“the Holy Spirit will come upon you... the child to be born will be holy... he will be called Son of God.”* Again, try to wrap your head around receiving this news. At this point I think I would be more perplexed, confused, and afraid than I was after hearing the initial news. Probably anticipating just this emotional response in Mary, Gabriel continues with some assurance that Mary is not alone. Elizabeth, her cousin, is six months pregnant. She who was barren, now in her old age has conceived a son. In closing, Gabriel states, *“For nothing will be impossible with God.”*



Before we turn to Mary’s response, let us note the language that Gabriel uses. I believe this is intentional. It is not you “might” conceive or you “might” name him Jesus. Gabriel does not say that Holy Spirit “might” come upon Mary or that Jesus “might” be great. God absolutely knew who Gabriel was being sent to. God was certain of who and what Mary was. God had a plan.



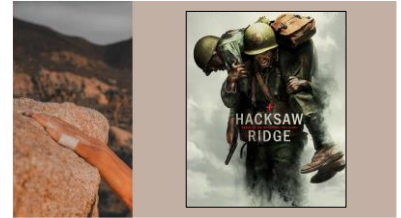
Nevertheless, Mary's response is perhaps one of the greatest example of faith in the whole Bible. Upon hearing all of this news – an angelic proclamation that she will soon be pregnant, not by Joseph but by the Holy Spirit, and that she will carry not just a baby but God's child AND that her elderly, long-barren cousin is with child – she simply replies, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* Mission accomplished, the angel Gabriel departs to return to heaven, leaving Mary to consider all that she has just heard and agreed to.



Today's message is called "The Subjunctive Space." The subjunctive space is the place where we deal with possibilities rather than facts. It is the space where we dare to think what God might really be capable of. This is the space that Mary (and her cousin Elizabeth) now find themselves in. In the space where Mary and Elizabeth are right now they are beginning to experience the reality of impossible possibilities that can happen in God's abundance. In the subjunctive space between the barren and elderly Elizabeth and the teenage virgin Mary blooms two miracles that both proclaim, "Nothing is impossible with God!"

Some have wondered or questioned if Elizabeth's story is necessary for Mary's story. After all, Elizabeth does become pregnant by her husband Zechariah. Yet, in the real world, it was unfathomable for her to be with child at such an advanced age after many, many years of being unable to conceive. Elizabeth's story is rooted in impossibility too. Her story reinforces what Mary's story tells us too – there are no bounds or limits when we consider or imagine or dream of what God can do.

When I was serving in Winner, Kristin and I went to a movie that gave the same message: nothing is impossible with God. Hacksaw Ridge focuses on the World War II experiences of Desmond Doss, an American pacifist combat medic who, as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, refused to carry a weapon. Throughout basic training and even as he is sent to the front in the Pacific theater, Doss refuses to carry or fire a weapon. It is against his beliefs so he serves as a medic.



You can imagine how much guff he took for enlisting in the Army yet refusing to carry a weapon. You can imagine how his fellow soldiers felt about going into combat with a fellow soldier who refused to fight back, who refused to kill the enemy. Doss's training officers and then his unit leaders try and drive him out of the military. Yet Doss remains committed to serving his God and his country. As the movie plays out, Doss and his fellow soldiers find themselves tasked with assaulting Hacksaw Ridge. The Japanese soldiers are dug in and well-armed. Here is how the approach began. Rope wrung by rope wrung the soldiers scaled the cliff that led up to where the enemy was entrenched. After a very bloody first day of battle, the order to withdraw was given.



But there were many injured soldiers still up there on the ridge, so Doss refused to leave the battlefield. As the last soldiers withdrew, in spite of their insistence that he withdraw too, Doss refused to leave the injured behind. Avoiding enemy fire throughout the night, Doss began to tend to the injured. One by one, he began to lower the injured back down the face of the cliff.

The soldiers who were standing guard at the bottom of the cliff grew more and more surprised as soldier after soldier was lowered down to safety. Soon it became known that it was Private Doss up there, saving those he could. Early in the process, Doss' prayer became, "God, let me save just one more." In total, Doss saved many men that night before being injured himself, coming down with injured soldier #75. In the aftermath of one of the bloodiest days of fighting in the Battle of Okinawa, Doss' actions revealed that there were no bounds or limits for what God can do when one faithfully and obediently steps into the plans that God has for him or her. As hopeless as the situation was or may be, there was and is no despair too deep, no pain too unbearable, no circumstance too far gone that it cannot be redeemed by God.

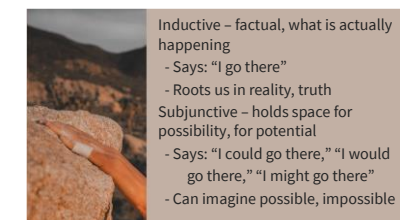
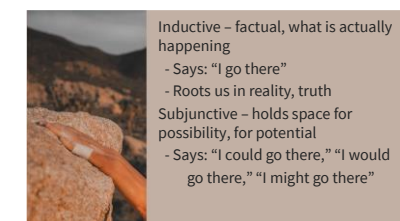
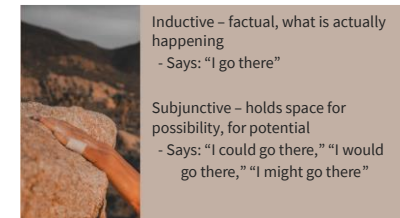
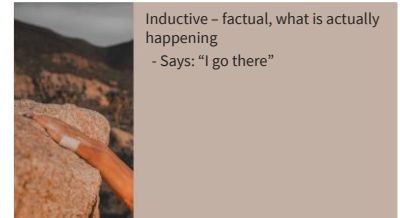
We tend to believe that our faith must be rooted in certainty and credibility. We are often hesitant to step into the subjunctive space that God invites us to step into. However,



being certain of what we know is true and possible has a way of suffocating the opportunities and possibilities that God has for us. What if, instead, we chose to root our faith in a space that we create between the extremes of what we understand to be impossible so that the Holy Spirit has room to move, to guide, to breathe, to lead, and even to expand our faith? How would a faith rooted in this subjunctive space change how we interacted with God and with one another? How would it change how we relate to and engage with the Christmas story?



The opposite of the subjunctive space is the indicative space. The indicative space dwells in the factual, in what is actually happening in the here and now. The indicative says, “I go there.” The subjunctive space holds all the nuances of possibilities and potentialities. The subjunctive says, “I could go there,” “I would go there,” “I might go there.” The power of the indicative is that it roots us in reality and in the truth of who we are. That is good. It grounds us in the belief that we are a child of God, in the truth that God loves us unconditionally. But, again, the indicative can prevent us from grasping alternative possibilities. It can make us feel stuck and trapped, accepting a reality that does not have to be. The power of the subjunctive is that we can imagine not only the possible but also the impossible.



All that being said, I ask, in terms of your faith, in which space do you most often live? And... where does our faith call us to live? To me, the key is to strike a balance between these two spaces. We cannot just live in one or the other. We cannot only practice the personal acts of piety. We must balance our faith by also practicing the acts of mercy. Both of these means of grace can draw us into the subjunctive space – into the space where the Holy Spirit has the room to move us to action, to guide us to places of ministry, to breathe new life into our souls, to lead us to people on the fringes, and even to expand our faith beyond what we thought it could be.

Mary and Elizabeth each held tightly to the indicative nature of their faith and to the indicative nature of who God is, fully embracing who and what they were in God. And Mary and Elizabeth embraced the subjunctive native of their faith as well. They stepped into the possibility of what God was up to, embracing the role that God was calling each of them to. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we are called to live into the space between the God whom we know personally and intimately and the God who is guiding our future, the God who boldly proclaims that all things are possible with God. May it be so for you and for me as we seek to live in this bold and exciting space with God. Alleluia and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. When have you stepped into the subjunctive space that God has called you into? How has that affected your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. As you consider how the Holy Spirit has “room” to move, to guide, to lead, to expand in your life, how could your prayer practices provide more “space”?
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 2:1-12. Consider the gifts that you have to offer to the King in the coming year. What gifts might you be willing to give to God in 2024?