

Message Manuscript for "How?" Luke 1:26-38  
Delivered to Church for the Highlands  
Sunday, December 18, 2011 Fourth Sunday of Advent

How? That is a question I would often hear from the backseats when Maggie Lee and Jack were younger. It is one, much like "why?" that comes with a certain inquisitive age when children move from mere observation of things to an analytical curiosity about how those things work. Parents, whether they actually know the answer or not, tend to wear out their patience to such curiosity, as one answer given leads to many more "hows?" This is a vital question for children everywhere, one that can lead to great discoveries in life.

In case you think we ever outgrow this stage, think again. We all continue to have our "how?" questions. Luke's account of the annunciation to Mary presents us with a young woman with a mouthful of "how"? Luke was figuring on his readers having this question and he does a superb job of stoking--as well as answering it--throughout his gospel. As the angel Gabriel came and announced to her what was about to happen within her, getting a bit personal with mention of her womb and all, Luke noted how she was "perplexed by his words." Even with the description of what was going to happen and how it all must have resonated deeply with Mary and her people's longing for change, she asked "how?" *How can this be, since I am a virgin?* Even though she was a teenager, everything she knew about childbirth informed her that this is not the way things worked. Babies don't just come from heaven. Any mention of this would lead to laughter and great suspicion, prefacing a death if not handled correctly. Mary's "how?" may not be a matter of disbelief as much as belief with curiosity. *Really, Gabriel? Great, but how is this going to happen?* is what I think is more along the lines of what was said in her "how?" Anyone brave enough to stick around when an angel shows up and actually talk with it just seems more full of belief than doubt. The "how?", nonetheless, lingers in the air.

Let's be honest with ourselves and each other this morning. It lingers in the air around us as well at times. We may not say it with our mouths like Mary, but it is a question in our minds so often. You might still be asking some how questions, too. The things of life we thought we understood have a way of perplexing us. Our jaws drop and our brain is scrambled at events and circumstances in our lives. We wonder how God will do what God plans to do, especially with we consider to be impossible. Babies don't just come from heaven, jobs don't just come out of thin air, a loving and supportive spouse doesn't just materialize one day (although some recent commercials say God is involved with the Christianmatch.com), depression doesn't just go away, joy cannot be found in pain, diseases don't just heal, churches can't really change neighborhoods, addicts can't really get clean, sinners can't be forgiven, and death can't be reversed. That's our natural thinking anyway. We, like Mary, look at our own circumstances, mixed with what we have observed to be true in our world, and ask our Lord, *how can this be, since I am this or that?*

Maybe Mary's "how?" is mostly about how God was with her and how God would be there with her in the future. Gabriel made sure she heard it loud and clear, and with good reason, *Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.* Most of us, if in Mary's context and time, would wonder how we could ever conclude that God is with us. Mary is a member of a religion that has constantly been captured, oppressed, and abused. She has seen horrible things done to her people and no doubt to her family. Whatever money they get is taken away, along with property, security, and dignity. In all of this, she must have found God's presence with her, for she had found favor with God. Like any other person, she must have wondered how God would be with her when word got out that she was with child. She must have wondered how she would take care of a child in her situation, how God would go with her as she raised him. And how would God be with her as she talked with Joseph about this announcement?

Have you ever wondered how God will be with you? As you think about what is ahead with work, at school, in service, do you hear God's promise but worry just a bit as to how God will actually do it? We hear what God has said and we learn of how God has been with other people, but we would feel a whole lot better if God would just tell us how He is going to do it; to show us the whole road ahead rather than the next step.

St. John of the Cross expressed his faith in God's presence with him this way, *Live in faith and hope, though it be in darkness, for in this darkness God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God for you are His and He will not forget you. Do not think that He is leaving you alone, for that would be to wrong Him.*<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you've heard the story about the man who fell off a cliff. He fell off a cliff, but managed to grab a tree limb on the way down. The following conversation ensued:

"Is anyone up there?"

"I am here. I am the Lord. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, Lord, I believe. I really believe, but I can't hang on much longer."

"That's all right, if you really believe you have nothing to worry about. I will save you. Just let go of the branch."

A moment of pause, then: "Is anyone else up there?"<sup>2</sup>

We can identify with this man because we feel that way at times, don't we? Don't you? We wonder about the "how?" when we ought to be focused on the Who.

Another "how?" that comes from Luke's account is "how unlikely!" First of all, this angel-- Gabriel of all angels--appears out of nowhere and into the seeming nothingness of Mary. How unlikely to even see an angel, much less to hear by it that you are favored by God! I mean, what are the chances of an unmarried peasant girl in Nazareth, far from the royal palace and any real future for her life, becoming the vessel for birthing God in flesh? Maybe this is built into the "how?" question of Mary, as she wondered how and why God chose to use her. I'm thinking a similar thought process is going on within Elizabeth as well, as she has been unable to have children and is now up in years, but learns that she too will conceive a son, John the Baptist. This is all indeed perplexing for both Mary and Elizabeth. While we don't get much information from Luke

here in this section, we can just imagine how the news went over with Joseph as Mary told him. We are familiar with how unlikely Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, thought all of this was for her.

When things are presented to us by God or God's special messengers, our first reaction is much the same as Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah: "How unlikely." God sends words of greeting to us and we say "how unlikely." We read of God's acts of provision and rescue, and we think, "how unlikely." Someone asks us to pray for a miracle and as we form the words of our prayer, "how unlikely." We hear someone say they will be healed by God and we quietly think to ourselves, "how unlikely." God sends His only begotten Son into the world, with a mission to love and not condemn, and we say, "how unlikely." Jesus speaks of a kingdom where hope is realized, peace is achieved, joy is birthed, and love is shared. And we say, "I wish it were so, but how unlikely."

The comforting thing to know about all of these "hows" is what the angel reminded Mary and reminds us today as well: *For nothing will be impossible with God.* Mary said, *let it me with me according to your word* and believed it. What about you?

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/faith.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Bits & Pieces, June 24, 1993, p. 3.