

# “How Can This Be?”

Luke 1:26-38

Sermon notes from the pulpit of  
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How can this be?

This is Mary's question.

God has chosen her. *But how? Why?* God has big plans for her. Big plans for any woman. Mary wasn't a queen. She wasn't rich. She was young. She was unlanded. She was inexperienced. She was unconnected to the halls of power. She was as far as we can tell—a *nobody*.

How can this be?

Notice the angel Gabriel doesn't seem to be asking Mary. He's telling her. He announced to her not to be afraid, that God had found favor with her, and that God had big plans for Mary, big plans for the world through Mary.

How can this be?

How did the scripture put it? *“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.”*

Say what? Hold on, brother.

Gabriel is clearly excited. One way to read this text is that Gabriel gets carried away with his message. That's how I read this passage. Gabriel isn't so much Robert Dinero as he is John Belushi. You can almost see the hope gleam and glimmer in his eye, as if he's seeing his words take place before his eyes. Look! This begins a new chapter in God's engagement with the world. *Look, look, look!* Look at what God is going to do!

Mary may be whispering in awe and shock, but her words fall like sledge hammers. Listen to me, you fluttery angel. Listen, listen, listen.

How can this be? She insists on being heard.

\* \* \*

How can this be?

Our question is sometimes the same as Mary's.

We live in a violent time. This year, shootings in Lewiston (Maine), Memphis, Philadelphia, Romeo (Illinois), and Shreveport have left many dead. These modern-day suicide bombers are killing our neighbors with legally owned weapons. And we are called by God—like it or not—to be peacemakers?

How can this be?

How can I step into the fray of this violence without being crushed?

How can this be that I am called to bring calm, listening ears, justice, and shalom? How can this be that I would be called to reform healthcare and education and make sure young women get affordable pre-natal care? How can I possibly serve and love and pray for at-risk families? How can I solve our mental healthcare crises?

How can this be that you, O God, would even ask me to tackle such a tangled, complicated issue. How, O God, can you ask me, ask this church, to be a peacemaker?

\* \* \*

God calls us to follow the one who loved the unloveable. How can it be that I could love my enemy when I can't even love everybody in my own family?

\* \* \*

We are called by God to share our resources, but our broker says if we share too much we'll run out. How can it be that God would call me to be a good steward?

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Last week at Parkland College, 119 men and women from 36 countries, from Albania to Yemen, were sworn in as brand new American citizens. It was a glad day. These new citizen were reminded that being a citizen takes engagement and hard work. Some of their number may be asking—How can it be that I should serve when I'm not yet accustomed to American ways?

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Moses asked God, How can it be that you are calling me to have a pow-wow with Pharoah when I'm a terrible public speaker?

Jeremiah asked God, How can it be that you would call me to be a prophet when I'm obviously too young?

Jonah asked God, How can it be that you would send me to Ninevah?

And Mary asks, How can it be that you have chosen me? How can it be that I am strong enough to bear this weight? I've had no relations with any man.

By way of explanation (*man-splaining?*), Gabriel describes the mechanics of how this would work. (This part of our passage makes me think of the driver's education teacher at the high school who teaches sex education every spring.) First, he says, the Holy Spirit will come to you. Second, the power of the Most High will overshadow you. (This may have raised more questions than it answered.) "You relative, Elizabeth has conceived a son and she's an old woman, and this is this sixth month for her who was said to be barren." You can see Gabriel back peddling, and then simply saying, "Look, Mary. Don't you know that nothing is impossible with God?"

I imagine a long silence in the text here—a pregnant pause, if you will. I imagine Mary turning those words over in her head. There's a big, big change in this silence.

Of course God can use Mary, and Jeremiah, and Moses, and Jonah, and you, and me. God can use our church and her ministry. God can speak every language through our ELL program. God can warm and house the homeless. God can feed the hungry.

And God can use even us to help bring this to pass.

*How can this be?*

That's a very, very, very good question.

The answer? *Nothing is impossible with God.*

But this excellent question didn't stop Mary from saying yes. Notice how Mary steps up. Notice how she claims this call, how she accepts it. She's no victim here. This is not foisted upon her. She has agency. She apparently trusted what Gabriel said. She apparently believed it in her bones. Nothing will be impossible for God, Gabriel said. Nothing will be impossible with God.

Mary could have said no. But she said yes.

Hers is a yes that echoes over the centuries, over the shepherds' field where they kept watch over their flock by night, through catacombs and cathedral naves, from generation to generation. We hear her yes even now.

Even now, the newbies, the nones and dones, the faithful and fretful are stopped in their tracks by this story, by Mary's shock, by her questions and doubt, by this high calling (which seems glorious and maybe a little unfair), by her quiet, certain, daring "YES."

May we be inspired by Mary's thoughtful faith, by Mary's courage to ask questions, by Mary's tenacity to stand up against an angel, and by Mary's willingness to say "yes."

Thanks be to God.

**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>[a]</sup><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>[b]</sup> <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<sup>[c]</sup> 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.