

# allowing god to do the impossible

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**Scripture Passage** Matthew 1:18-25

When I talk with people about where they are in their relationship with God, I often ask them where they are on spiritual journey or spiritual pilgrimage. Those two words, journey and pilgrimage, are good words to describe, not only physical travel, but also spiritual travel.

Our guides this morning are a young couple and she is pregnant. Actually very pregnant. You know their names. Their names are Mary and Joseph. This journey is not only a physical journey, as we shall see it is also a spiritual journey. It is taking them on their own pilgrimage with God.

They are on their way some 80 miles to a small town called Bethlehem. They have to go there because some Roman bureaucrat called Caesar Augustus has ordered a census. Instead of people coming to your home as happens today when a census is taking place, they are required to go back to their own town. It is the last thing they really wanted to do, especially in Mary's condition, but they do not have a choice.

Let me tell you about Mary. Like most girls in her village, Mary was engaged at an early age. Babies soon followed.

Mary was engaged to someone that everyone said was a nice young man. He had his own business. Not really large. Just a small carpenter's shop behind his house, but he always paid his bills on time. He did good work, and he had a good reputation.

Then one day her life changed, and a different journey begins. An angel comes to her, like most people she has never seen or experienced an angel before, and the angel's message was unbelievable. She was going to have a baby. A baby! And he would be the child of the most high God!

A thousand questions and contradictions rise in her mind. That is not possible. She has never had sex with Joseph, or any man. She had never even seen a man naked. She had bathed her little brother, but that was different. This news was unthinkable, unimaginable, unbelievable.

So she asks. She exclaimed: **how can this be?**

But the angel goes on. The Holy spirit will come upon you and you will bear the son of God. He will reign over the house of Jacob and his kingdom will be forever. The question is still

echoing round in her head. How can this be? The angel concludes, nothing is impossible with God.

Mary was quiet, really quiet, for a long time, and then she slowly, thoughtfully answers:

**I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said, and then the angel leaves her.**

God was asking something unique from her. Something that only a woman can fully understand. Something that only a woman can offer. God asked for permission to use her body, to use her womb, that dark intimate place that belonged only to her. God was asking permission to use her womb to be the human cradle that would carry the son of God for nine months and then push him out into the world.

Without thinking her hand dropped to rub her tummy. She started to imagine what it would feel like as it started to swell and she would feel the baby move and turn inside her.

Even although her conception was anything but normal, as Isaiah says, a virgin will bear a child. We assume that Mary had a normal pregnancy. It lasted 9 months. Perhaps there was also that bothersome and fatiguing stage of morning sickness. She felt her back become heavy and sore. As the months wore on she could not bend down to tie and untie her sandals. Life was just uncomfortable. The stories and the gossip about her, to say the least, strange pregnancy had long since died down. People had new things to gossip and tittle-tattle about.

There were no prenatal checkups. No clinics for expectant mothers. No La Maze classes for couples to attend together, to learn helpful breathing exercises.

Then this nuisance of a command comes. A census, who in their right mind ordered a census. And you could not go just anywhere. You had to go back to your own town. And so Joseph was commanded to go back to Bethlehem. Perhaps he had tried to get some kind of exemption. After all look at his wife's condition. But there was no exceptions. Everyone had to go. There was a serious penalty if you ignored the order.

Now she is on this journey to Bethlehem. Her tummy getting larger each day. Every bump on

the road gets more painful. Each day she feels more and more uncomfortable.

It was about a four day trip under the best of travel conditions. And perhaps just as the darkness started to fall and the lights of Bethlehem were just in sight, Mary felt the first sharp pain. There had been other pains she had felt but she had not said anything. This one was different from anything else. She instinctively held her swollen tummy, took a deep breath as the first wave of sharp pain came. She cried out, Joseph! Joseph!

“We will soon be there, Mary. Just hang on!” He had no idea that you cannot tell a woman about to give birth to hang on! Joseph was now in a race against the stork. And he was losing. Babies tend not to wait.

Then there is the whole bit about no room in the inn. You all know that part of the story.

Finally when they get settled into whatever is left. Can you imagine? A stable! That’s all that’s left. A local woman is called for. She will be the midwife. In fact she has delivered more babies in the town than anyone else. Every time a baby is due, she was called for. There is no doctor trained in obstetrics. No sterile delivery rooms. Somewhere in the midst of scratchy hay and the pungent smell of fresh manure, a baby is about to be born.

As things get closer, Joseph, like every man, is ordered out of the room. His presence would only be a nuisance. After all, he was a man. He would only get in the road and would not have a clue about what to do.

Babies have always arrived the same way. Born in the midst of pain, mess, blood. And so was Jesus.

She knew nothing of what lay ahead of her. What it would be like to raise this unique son. And in 30 years or so, she would find herself weeping at the foot of his cross. She could not bear to look up at him on the cross anymore. Tears racked every inch of her body. The pain was much greater than the pain of childbirth. She felt as though her entire life came to an end at that moment. She did not think she would be able to go on living. But that story is for another time.

But all of that hinges on how she replies to her own question to the angel: how can this be?

Her response is this:

**I am the Lord’s servant.**

**Whoever I am, I will offer, even this most intimate part of me.**

**Whatever I have I will give.**

**Whatever God asks, I will do.**

Each of us will come to moments like that. God asks something of us that lies beyond our knowledge. Beyond what is normal, which will require faith to trust him. We ask, how can this be? How will this all work out?

We may not understand. We do not know how it will all work out. We cannot see the road ahead. All we are asked to do at that moment is to trust what he is asking us to bring. Perhaps that is where you are.

But there is another person in this drama to consider. I think often forgotten about and sometimes overlooked. It is Joseph.

So guys, lets be honest. You are engaged to a lovely girl. Your parents are delighted. they think she is just right for you. In a way that cuts across the norms of our culture and no matter what everyone else says they are doing, you have never had sex with her. That is not easy. No matter the time or the culture. It is a sacred moment that you are both committed to keep for your wedding night.

And then one evening she comes to visit you after work. You go for a walk as you often do. She says to you, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I am going to have a baby! There is a moment of silence, deafening silence! Joseph’s face fills with unbelief, for a moment he can hardly speak. Then he blurts out.

**A baby!** How did that happen? Sometimes men say the dumbest things.

A baby. Are you sure? She nods. Eyes filled with tears. Unable to look at him.

But imagine the feelings that would overwhelm you.

**Anger.** You feel betrayed.

**Revenge.** Tell me who it is and I will get him!

**Shame.** What will everyone say. All my friends will be talking behind my back. I can already begin to hear them...

**Do you expect me to believe that? Is that the best story you could come up with?**

Read between the lines. Joseph storms off, angry, upset, bewildered. He also asks himself: **how can this be?**

So just as an angel had to come to Mary to explain things to her, so an angel comes to Joseph to help him understand what God is doing. You see, angels are often used to explain to us mere humans what God is doing. What God is up to.

His human solution is to put Mary and this whole situation behind him. Just quietly get rid of her, but God asks him to see it through. It will be hard, but it can be done.

Let me talk to us men for a moment on this Christmas season and try to understand the heart of Joseph.

I think I we are honest. Most of us men find this spiritual stuff and any talk about a relationship with God somewhat harder for us as men than it is for women. I am not sure why that is. Perhaps it's a lot to do with how we are wired. Our maleness, in a general sense, women seem to find it easier to relate to a spiritual dimension in their lives than men do.

As men, we think we have to be in control. We are the ones who will be in charge. We know how to fix things or we think we do. We are the ones who are supposed to have all the answers or we think we do. And so when it comes to dealing with God and relating to God, we are generally slower and more unwilling, more hesitant than most women are.

I think men often find it harder to be open to God. We find it harder to be more vulnerable. We want to appear strong rather than weak. In charge rather than helpless. Suddenly we find that we are not in charge. We do not have all the answers. In fact we feel helpless and we men do not like that.

The journey that men have to take, the pilgrimage we are on, often takes a different route for us men than it takes for women.

One of the tight corners we often have to get round as we journey with God in our maleness is to surrender our desire for control, our need to be in charge, our need to have all the answers.

The Christmas story for men is about being open to what God wants to do in our lives, even though we may not understand all that is taking place, we are also asking, how can this be? It is about being gentle rather than trying to appear tough. It is about being vulnerable rather than trying to appear that we have it all together.

Our journey with God, our pilgrimage into spirituality, starts when we can give up these false images of what it means to be male, and allow God to come and speak to us just as a man.

Our journey with God takes us on further when we realize that there is nothing unmanly or unmasculine about allowing God to come before us and to direct our lives.

We will find that it is actually acceptable and preferable before God to be meek, which is not the same as being weak. It is all right to give up control. It is amazing what can happen when we learn to trust God and his plans. And it is even all right to cry.

So in different ways both Mary and Joseph really need to discover the same thing in their lives. It is the willingness to allow God to speak to them about what He wants to do. And the courage to allow him to do it when we are faced with mystery and we ask, how can this be?

For Mary, it is the willingness to give him control of her body. For Joseph, it is the courage to surrender his male ego to God. When they do this, they are on their journey towards Bethlehem, and that is not only physical journey, it is also a spiritual pilgrimage.

This journey to Bethlehem and beyond is a spiritual pilgrimage worth taking at Christmas time and any time of the year. It is a spiritual journey that you must not miss.

So think with me for a moment, where are you in your pilgrimage? Your journey with God? Are you facing some issue? Some obstacle? Some obstruction? Some impossibility and you are

thinking, how can this be? How can this ever work out?

Remember the word of the angel: nothing is impossible with God.