Luke 1:26-38
December 24, ‘17
Morning

“How can this be?”

I want to share two conversations I had this past week.

The first one involved something that our son, Derek, shared with me about 10 years ago.

When he was serving as an associate pastor in Orlando, Florida, he was greeting people following worship one Sunday and a woman handed him a 20-dollar bill & said, “Derek, this is for you. It’s so you can buy a white shirt to wear when you’re serving communion.”

True story.
NOW, I DON’T KNOW IF THAT EVENT HAD ANY IMPACT ON DEREK, BUT I KNOW THAT IT DID ON ME.

I’M NOT SURE I EVER THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT SHIRT I WAS WEARING ON ANY GIVEN SUNDAY, BUT FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS – EVEN IF I DON’T THINK ABOUT IT ON OTHER SUNDAYS – IF WE’RE HAVING COMMUNION, I ALWAYS WEAR A WHITE SHIRT!

YOU NEVER KNOW WHO YOU MIGHT OFFEND BY – HEAVEN FORBID – WEARING A BLUE SHIRT ON A COMMUNION SUNDAY!

THE SECOND CONVERSATION REMINDED ME OF SOMETHING I EXPERIENCED MYSELF ABOUT 30 YEARS AGO IN A CHURCH I FORMERLY SERVED.

DURING WORSHIP, A WOMAN WAS CLEARLY DISTRESSED ABOUT SOMETHING.
SHE WAS SHAKING HER HEAD IN WHAT SEEMED TO BE A DISPLAY OF UTTER DISBELIEF.

SHE BARELY LOOKED AT ME OR ANYTHING ELSE IN THE FRONT OF THE CHURCH DURING WORSHIP.

AFTERWARDS, SHE MADE A QUICK EXIT BEFORE I COULD ASK HER WHY SHE WAS SO TROUBLED.

THE NEXT DAY, I CALLED TO CHECK ON HER & DISCOVERED THE SOURCE OF HER DISPLEASURE.

ALMOST THROUGH TEARS, SHE TOLD ME HOW DISAPPOINTED SHE WAS WHEN SHE WALKED INTO THE SANCTUARY TO DISCOVER THAT THE PARAMENTS ON THE COMMUNION TABLE & PULPIT WERE THE WRONG COLOR!

AGAIN – TRUE STORY.
IF I HADN’T PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED THE SECOND ONE, I WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD-PRESSED TO BELIEVE DEREK WHEN HE TOLD ME THE FIRST ONE!

I’M NOT SURE WHERE I FIRST HEARD THE TERM, BUT I THINK THOSE ARE TWO PRIME EXAMPLES OF WHAT’S KNOWN AS “MAJORING IN THE MINORS!”

THERE’S A POINT TO ALL OF THIS.

THE CONVERSATION THAT REMINDED ME OF THE WOMAN’S DISMAY AT THE INCORRECT PARAMENTS IN THE SANCTUARY WAS WITH SOMEONE WHO WAS ASKING WHAT THE PROPER COLOR WAS FOR TODAY.

NORMALLY, THAT’S AN EASY QUESTION TO ANSWER IF YOU KNOW THE SEASONS OF THE
CHURCH YEAR & THEIR TRADITIONALLY CORRESPONDING COLORS.

BUT TODAY IS DIFFERENT.

TODAY, OF COURSE, IS CHRISTMAS EVE.

BUT TODAY IS ALSO THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT.

THE COLOR FOR THE CHRISTMAS SEASON IS WHITE.

THE COLOR FOR ADVENT IS PURPLE.

WHAT DO YOU DO ON A DAY WHEN IT’S BOTH?

WHAT I DID IS LOOK AT OUR DENOMINATIONAL COLOR-CODED CALENDAR TO DISCOVER THAT TODAY IS A HALF & HALF DAY.

THIS MORNING, IT’S THE SEASON OF ADVENT.

TONIGHT, IT’S THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS.

PURPLE THIS MORNING & WHITE TONIGHT.
LEST YOU THINK I’M BEING SILLY FOR EVEN BRINGING UP SUCH THINGS, REMEMBER – THERE ARE THOSE WHO “MAJOR IN THE MINORS” AND WILL BE UNDULY DISTRESSED IF WE GET IT WRONG!

BUT, SURELY, NOT HERE.

BUT ALL OF THAT ALSO RAISES AN INTERESTING POINT ABOUT THIS DAY.

THIS MORNING, WE’VE READ THE STORY OF WHAT WE CALL “THE ANNUNCIATION” – LUKE’S STORY OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO MARY FROM THE ANGEL GABRIEL THAT SHE WILL GIVE BIRTH TO THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD.

TONIGHT, WE’LL HEAR LUKE’S ACCOUNT OF THAT BIRTH.

IN BETWEEN, WE HAVE ONLY THE STORY THAT TREY SHARED LAST SUNDAY OF MARY’S VISIT TO
HER COUSIN, ELIZABETH & THEN THE BIRTH OF
JOHN THE BAPTIST.

SO, CHRONOLOGICALLY, WE’LL BE COVERING
NINE MONTHS IN THE SPACE OF ABOUT NINE HOURS.

WHEN GABRIEL GIVES MARY THE NEWS THAT
SHE HAS BEEN CHOSEN TO BE THE MOTHER OF THE
SON OF GOD, THE FIRST WORDS SHE UTTERS ARE,
“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

DR. JEREMY BASSETT IS A PASTOR IN
OKLAHOMA.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, HE WAS OBSERVING THE
BACKSTAGE PREPARATIONS FOR A CHRISTMAS
PAGEANT.

HIS FIVE-YEAR-OLD NIECE, OLIVIA, AND HER
BEST FRIEND, CLAIRE, WERE PARTICIPATING IN THE
PAGEANT.
ONE OF THE LITTLE BOYS WAS GOING AROUND TO EVERYONE, SAYING, “I’M A SHEEP. WHAT ARE YOU?”

EACH CHILD RESPONDED POLITELY, INCLUDING OLIVIA, WHO TOLD THE BOY SHE WAS AN ANGEL.

THEN THE KID WALKED UP TO CLAIRE, WHO HAD BEEN CAST IN THE ROLE OF MARY.

HE SAID, AGAIN, “I’M A SHEEP. WHAT ARE YOU?” CLAIRE SAID SIMPLY, “I’M MARY.”

REALIZING HE WAS FACE TO FACE WITH THE LEAD CHARACTER (SINCE JESUS WAS A DOLL), THE BOY ATTEMPTED TO JUSTIFY HIMSELF.

HE SAID VERY SERIOUSLY, “IT’S NOT EASY BEING A SHEEP, YOU KNOW.”
TO WHICH FIVE-YEAR-OLD CLAIRE RESPONDED WITH EQUAL SERIOUSNESS, “YES, I KNOW. IT’S NOT EASY BEING A VIRGIN, EITHER.”

LET’S FACE IT – IT’S WASN’T EASY FOR MARY TO HEAR SUCH AN ANNOUNCEMENT FROM GABRIEL.

THAT’S WHY SHE SAID, “HOW CAN THIS BE?”

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, THE WHOLE THING IS RATHER PREPOSTEROUS, ISN’T IT?

IS IT ANY WONDER THAT MARY ASKED, “HOW CAN THIS BE?”

THE WHOLE STORY HAS TO MAKE US ASK, “HOW CAN THIS BE?”

THINK ABOUT WHAT LUKE IS TELLING US HERE. AN ANGEL VISITS – AND TALKS TO – A TEEN-AGE GIRL.

HOW CAN THIS BE?
THE ANGEL TELLS THIS TEEN-AGE GIRL THAT, EVEN THOUGH SHE’S A VIRGIN, SHE’S GOING TO HAVE A BABY.

HOW CAN THIS BE?

THE ANGEL GOES EVEN FURTHER IN TELLING THIS TEEN-AGE GIRL THAT THE BABY SHE WILL BEAR IS GOING TO BE THE SON OF THE MOST HIGH – A KING WHO WOULD FULFILL “THE HOPES & FEARS OF ALL THE YEARS.”

HOW CAN THIS BE?

AND EVEN BEFORE THIS, LUKE WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE THAT SAME ANGEL HAD VISITED AN OLD MAN NAME ZECHARIAH TO TELL HIM THAT HIS WIFE WAS GOING TO HAVE A CHILD – EVEN THOUGH SHE, TOO, WAS OLD & KNEW THAT SHE COULD NEVER HAVE CHILDREN.
HOW CAN THIS BE?

IF YOU HAVE TROUBLE BELIEVING ALL THIS – IF YOU CAN’T HELP BUT ASK “HOW CAN THIS BE?” – YOU’RE NOT ALONE.

PEOPLE HAVE LOGICALLY & LEGITIMATELY ASKED THIS SAME QUESTION FOR 2,000 YEARS – AND THEY STILL ASK IT TODAY.

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS IN THE WORLD IS A GUY NAMED BART EHRMAN.

HE’S A BRILLIANT MAN & HIGHLY-REGARDED COLLEGE PROFESSOR.

HE PRESENTS LECTURES ALL OVER THE WORLD & HAS PREPARED A VARIETY OF PROGRAMS FOR WHAT’S KNOWN AS “THE GREAT COURSES” WHICH FEATURES OUTSTANDING TEACHERS & SCHOLARS
IN VIRTUALLY EVERY FIELD OF STUDY IMAGINABLE.

EVEN THOUGH BART EHRMAN IS A HIGHLY-REGARDED NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR, HE’S ALSO AN ACKNOWLEDGED AGNOSTIC WHO IS ONE OF THOSE WHO ASKS “HOW CAN THIS BE?”


PERHAPS THAT’S YOU.

MAYBE YOU ASK THE SAME QUESTION – “HOW CAN THIS BE?”
AND MAYBE, LIKE BART EHRMAN, WHEN YOU ASK THE QUESTION, YOU COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT, BECAUSE SO MANY OF THE THINGS WE READ IN SCRIPTURE CAN’T BE TRUE, YOU SIMPLY CAN’T CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN.

OR MAYBE YOU’RE AFRAID THAT IF YOU DON’T BELIEVE IT ALL – EVEN IF YOU WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN – YOU CAN’T CLASSIFY YOURSELF AS ONE WITHOUT BELIEVING THOSE THINGS.

PERHAPS THERE’S ANOTHER WAY.

WHAT IF YOU DON’T GET HUNG UP ON SOME OF THE THINGS WE READ IN SCRIPTURE?

WHAT IF YOU DON’T WORRY ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT SOMETHING HAPPENED EXACTLY AS IT’S PRESENTED IN THE BIBLE?
WHAT IF YOU LOOK BEYOND THE WORDS & THE EVENTS & LOOK FOR SOMETHING DEEPER?

WHAT IF YOU TAKE THE APPROACH OF THE FATHER WHO WENT TO JESUS TO FIND HELP FOR HIS SON WHO WAS IN THE CLUTCHES OF AN EVIL SPIRIT, WHEN HE SAID, “I BELIEVE. HELP MY UNBELIEF.”

WHAT IF YOU COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT, HOWEVER IT HAPPENED, GOD ENTERED THE WORLD IN THE PERSON OF JESUS WHO CAME TO SAVE US FROM THE CLUTCHES OF EVIL & DIED TO GIVE US THE ASSURANCE OF ABUNDANT & ETERNAL LIFE?

I HAVE MY OWN PERSONAL BELIEF & UNDERSTANDING OF LUKE’S “FLY ON THE WALL” STORY THAT WE’VE READ THIS MORNING.
HERE’S WHAT I BELIEVE – I BELIEVE THAT A LITTLE OVER 2,000 YEARS AGO, AN ANGEL NAMED GABRIEL WAS SENT BY GOD TO THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF NAZARETH.

HE WENT TO THE HOME OF A YOUNG TEEN-AGE VIRGIN NAMED MARY AND TOLD HER THAT SHE HAD BEEN CHOSEN BY GOD TO BE THE ONE WHO WOULD BEAR GOD’S SON WHO WOULD BE IMMANUEL – GOD IN THE FLESH.

“How can this be?” you ask.

I ask the same thing.

“How can this be?”

But I know that God is much larger than my mind can possibly comprehend.

As God says to Isaiah, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher
THAN YOUR WAYS AND MY THOUGHTS THAN YOUR 
THOUGHTS.”

OR, AS IS COMMONLY SAID, “IF GOD WAS SMALL 
ENOUGH FOR OUR MINDS, GOD WOULDN’T BE LARGE 
ENOUGH FOR OUR NEEDS.”

LET ME HASTEN TO ADD THAT JUST BECAUSE 
THIS IS WHAT I BELIEVE, I’M NOT SUGGESTING 
THAT THIS IS WHAT YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE TO BE A 
FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

I’M NOT SAYING THAT YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE 
ALL THE LITERAL WORDS OF SCRIPTURE TO 
BELIEVE THAT GOD HAS ENTERED THE WORLD IN 
THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST & THAT HE DIED TO 
GIVE US THE PROMISE OF ABUNDANT & ETERNAL 
LIFE.
BUT LET’S GO BACK TO WHERE WE BEGAN – WITH WHITE SHIRTS FOR COMMUNION & PROPER PULPIT PARAMENT COLORS.

AT WHAT POINT DO WE MOVE BEYOND COMMITTING OURSELVES TO THE ESSENTIALS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH & STEP INTO THE REALM OF “MAJORING IN THE MINORS?”

THAT LINE IS PROBABLY DIFFERENT FOR EVERY ONE OF US HERE THIS MORNING.

I WOULD SUGGEST THAT, FOR ME, THE ESSENTIALS ARE FOUND IN PRECISELY WHAT JESUS SUGGESTED THEY ARE WHEN HE WAS ASKED FOR HIS OWN ANSWER – “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, SOUL, STRENGTH & MIND…AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”
AFTER MARY ASKS THE “HOW CAN THIS BE?” QUESTION THAT WE ALL ASK, SHE FOLLOWS IT UP WITH SOMETHING ELSE.

IT’S SOMETHING WE USED LAST SUMMER WHEN WE WERE LOOKING AT “SECULAR SONGS THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL.”

EVEN THOUGH MARY ASKS – AS WE DO – “HOW CAN THIS BE?” – ONCE IT ALL SETTLES INSIDE OF HER – ONCE SHE CONCLUDES THAT GOD IS BEHIND IT ALL - SHE SAYS “LET IT BE.”

LAST SUMMER, HERE’S HOW WE CONCLUDED OUR LOOK AT THOSE WORDS - WHEN LIFE SEEMS TO CRASH IN UPON YOU, WHEN HOPE IS FLEETING & TROUBLES THREATEN TO OVERWHELM YOU, MAY YOU ENDEAVOR TO TAKE THE ATTITUDE OF MARY IN HER NIGHTTIME ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANGEL GABRIEL.
WHEN YOU COMMIT YOURSELF TO GOD’S HANDS & GOD’S CARE, YOU’RE ABLE TO “LET GO & LET GOD.” YOU’RE ABLE TO SIMPLY “LET IT BE.”

WHEN YOU’RE TEMPTED TO ASK THE QUESTION, “HOW CAN THIS BE?,” KNOW THAT – HOWEVER IT HAPPENED 2,000 YEARS AGO & HOWEVER IT HAPPENS TODAY, GOD IS STANDING AT YOUR SIDE IN THE PERSON OF IMMANUEL – GOD WITH US – AND, BELIEVE ME, THAT’S NOT “MAJORING IN THE MINORS!” AMEN.

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