

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 DENOMINATIOAL
COLOR-CODED CALENDART 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 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?"**

**HE LOOKS AT ALL THE EVIDENCE – ALL OF THE
PREPOSTEROUS CLAIMS OF SOMEONE LIKE LUKE –
ALL OF THE INCONSISTENCIES IN THE BIBLE – ALL
OF THE THINGS THAT WE KNOW – THROUGH
SCIENCE & REASON – THAT JUST AREN'T POSSIBLE –
AND HE 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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