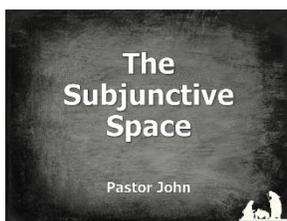


"The Subjunctive Space"

December 24, 2017

Scripture: Luke 1: 26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you". ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ 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 will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ 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.



For the last two weeks of our "Coming Soon" series we have been walking with John the Baptist. John calls people to God and to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. In

doing so, John gives us a model to follow as we answer our call to bring others to Christ. As we do as John did, we also model Jesus as we seek to go out into the world to be the hands and feet of love and compassion and mercy. Today we meet our next two characters in the unfolding story – Mary and Elizabeth – as we look their lives to find more examples of the possibilities of what God can do. Let us pray.

Just as John the Baptist set the stage for the coming of Jesus, so too does Elizabeth set the stage for Mary, Jesus' mother. In our passage today, the angel tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth is six months pregnant. This news is followed by the pronouncement, "*For nothing will be impossible with God*". While Mary's pregnancy will be the work of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth's pregnancy comes the old-fashioned way. While Mary is young and of the typical age for marrying and starting a family, Elizabeth is not. For the rest of this story, let us turn to the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke's gospel begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both have lived lives that were "*righteous before God, living blamelessly*" - yet they were childless. In the culture of the day, being childless was seen as a disgrace and was often associated with a sign of God's displeasure.

As the couple entered their "later years" in life, they had long given up all hopes of having a child. Then one day, while on duty in the temple, Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the Sanctuary to offer incense to the Lord. It would have been a high honor – many priests served their whole lives and never were able

to enter the Sanctuary. While in the sanctuary, an angel appears to him and informs him that he and Elizabeth will have a baby. Zechariah questions the angel, saying, *"How will I know this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting along in years"*. Because Zechariah questions the messenger of God, he will remain mute until the child is born and is named John. Soon Elizabeth becomes pregnant and remains in seclusion for five months, marveling over what the Lord has done. After all, Elizabeth is in her later years and has been unable to have a child for all these years. Using human logic, it would seem an impossible time to have a child, yet through God's power, the impossible becomes possible. Elizabeth moves from the hard reality of her life of shame and disgrace to the subjunctive space of hope and purpose, where God reveals what God alone can do. God makes a way where there appeared to be no way.

Shortly after this, the same angel that visited Elizabeth comes to Mary.

Returning to our passage for today, Gabriel begins with:

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you". Mary is perplexed and wonders what this greeting could mean. Why is she favored? Isn't God always with her? Gabriel goes on to



say, *"Do not be afraid..."* and then tells her that she is going to conceive a son in her womb and is to name him Jesus. When we consider Mary's situation, this is an equally unlikely scenario for a pregnancy. Gabriel visits a virgin who is not married and tells her that she is going to have a baby. In our human way of understanding the things of life, something happening is kind of required to have a baby. This would have been Mary's initial frame of understanding too.

Therefore she asks, *"How can this be, since I am a virgin"?*

The angel Gabriel explains how this impossible thing will become possible. In verse 35 we read, *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God"*.

Can you imagine what was going through Mary's mind at this point? What would be going through your mind if you were in her shoes?

When we look at Elizabeth's story and Mary's story together, we begin to see the abundance of God's possibilities. Each story expands our understanding of God's power to do

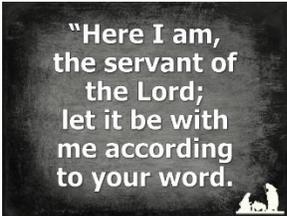
anything. In Elizabeth, we see one who was barren and elderly being used as a part of God's big plan of salvation. In Mary, we see an unmarried virgin teenager being used as a part of God's big plan. In the extremes of these two stories we begin to see that there are no bounds for what God can and will do. There is no despair too deep for God to bring someone up and out of that hole. There is no pain too great that God cannot bring healing to that person. There is no situation so hopeless that it is outside of God's redeeming power. There is no sin so great that God's love cannot offer grace and mercy and forgiveness. As we begin to wrap our heads around these truths about God, we begin to see the subjunctive space in which God often operates.

Often times we ground our faith in certainty and believability. We are comfortable in the indicative space. The indicative captures the facts of the matter and what is actually happening or really happened. But in a way, the

indicative is limited. When we cling to a faith rooted in certainty, we tend to suffocate our faith as we limit the opportunities that God has to both surprise us and to use us. But what if our faith operated in the subjunctive space – in that place that is open to and even looking for God to be at work in unlikely or seemingly impossible ways? What if we lived a faith that allowed the Holy Spirit room to breathe, to move, and to flow through and in our lives? Imagine how that would change the way we interacted with the world. Imagine how that would change the way we see the Christmas story. Imagine how that would change our faith and our relationship with God and each other.

In our faith journey, the indicative would say, “I go there”. For us, this may be saying I go to church on Sunday mornings or I go to Bible study on Wednesday afternoons. For some, it is saying I go to MYF on Wednesday nights. The indicative stands upon the facts and the realities. It is safe and known. It is steady and sure. But in our faith journey, the subjunctive says, “I could go there” or “I might go there”. It leans into what could be possible. It says I could invite that friend to join me at MYF next week. It says I could step outside my comfort zone and try teaching a Sunday school class or a Financial Peace University class. It says I might go on that mission trip to Puerto Rico. The subjunctive allows us to ponder the “what ifs” and to dream into the possibilities that God might have for our life. The power of the subjunctive is that we can imagine not only the possible but also the impossible. It is exciting and vibrant. It is alive and active.

Our faith must embrace both the indicative and the subjunctive. They are both essential to our faith journey. The truth of who we are is rooted in the indicative. The eternal nature and truths of God are rooted in the indicative. Mary was living fully in the indicative when she said, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"*. She was trusting in the truth of who she was in God and who God was for her – faithful and true. What God said was good for her.



"Here I am,
the servant of
the Lord;
let it be with
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to your word.

But we must also embrace the subjunctive. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we must embrace the possibilities of what God can do. When God told the husband of an old and barren woman that they were going to have a baby, Zechariah first got stuck in the indicative – the reality – but then eventually embraced the subjunctive – the possibility of what God could do. When God told the young, unmarried virgin that she was going to have a baby through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary embraced the impossible and lived into the subjunctive space that God was calling her to. Where is the subjunctive space in our faith?



The
Subjunctive
Space

As a church, there are certain truths that we live by. They are the essentials or the bedrock of our faith. These truths are things like God loves us all, that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins, that one day the faithful will experience eternal life, that God will never abandon or leave us. This is the indicative nature of our faith. But we cannot just live here. We must also be aware of how God might be leading us

and we must be seeking to discover where God is calling us to as a church. When we consider our church and our personal faith, where do we sense that God is calling us to? Is He calling us to that neighbor? Is He calling us to start this program or to try that event? Like Mary and Elizabeth, we are called to live into God's possibilities, trusting that God alone can lead us into the impossible and that God can make all things happen for good. We are called to connect the dots between the God whom we know and have always known and the God who wants to guide our future. It is an exciting and wonderful place to go on our faith journey. Our God is limitless and all-powerful. May we always be open to the possible and the impossible that God calls us to, trusting fully in our God who knows all things and who can do all things. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) How could you live a bit more in the subjunctive space – in the place of God's possibilities for your faith and your life?
- 2) To whom or what is God maybe calling you to witness or to serve? Pray for God's guidance, direction, and the courage to step out.
- 3) Mary accepted God's invitation to be a servant. What subjunctive place may God be calling you to be a humble servant? How can you serve?