

Impossible Situations: Perceiving! *Luke 1:5-13 (NRSV)*

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“Do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will name him John.”

During this season, in a time of chaos and confusion, I want you to look with me at how God deals with impossible situations. Advent is a time of expectancy and a time of joyful anticipation. It is a time when the Christian church looks forward with hope. We are in the season of Advent, and instead of this being a time of hope, it is really a time of chaos and confusion. Our country is in the middle of a war that was started on the basis of phony evidence. This is a time of chaos and confusion.

We have seen an avalanche of legal memos exempting the executive branch of our government from the law and the legal justification for condoning torture. This is a time of chaos and confusion. We are not even numbed by the widespread torture, even when the people being tortured are not enemy combatants, just Arabs with names that most of us cannot pronounce. This is a time of chaos and confusion.

There has been a deep shroud of secrecy dropped over the presidency and the claim that the President can lock away any person, American citizen or not, on his own say so as the commander-in-chief. This is a time of chaos and confusion.

We have a tax break for the rich. We have seen the budget surplus turn into a budget deficit. We have seen no education for Blacks and Browns buried under a slogan (stolen from Marian Wright Edelman) with no money to fund the phony program from the start, and we have seen a so-called healthcare bill passed to benefit the pharmaceuticals and the HMOs while 47 million American citizens do not have any healthcare insurance whatsoever. This is a time of chaos and confusion!

We have also seen (as Jonathan Snell says) an across-the-board rejection on the part of those in power of being accountable for any of this mess that we are in. We are living in a time of chaos and confusion, and it gets worse. We have seen 51 percent of the American voters (or so they told us) look at all these things four years ago. Lies about the war. Lies about the evidence for weapons of mass destruction. Lives lost as a result of the lies and the war, more than 4,000 on our side, more than 200,000 on the other side. Fifty-one percent of the American voters (or so they told us) looked at all of these things: Condoned torture. Condoned rape of Arab women – noncombatant women. Secrecy shrouding the presidency. Unbridled power for the commander-in-chief.

Fifty-one percent of the American voters (or so they told us) looked at all of these things: Tax break for the rich. Tax burden for the poor. Underfunded education programs designed to help and make Black and Brown kids fail. A healthcare bill that does not care about health. Fourteen million American children and a total of 47 million Americans with no healthcare insurance and an administration that refused to take responsibility for any of this. We have seen 51 percent of the American voters (or so they told us) look at all these things and call them good.

In the words of Terry Atkins, we live in an age where information is more important to people than knowledge. We live in an age where mediocrity is propped up as genius. We live in an age where the billionaire is the hero of contemporary life, and most tragically, we live in an age where image veils a lack of substance. We are living in a time of chaos and confusion.

Now, to an outsider looking in at our messed-up situation, it would almost seem obvious that we are faced with some impossible situations, and that is why I want you to look with me during this season of Advent, in a time of chaos and confusion, at how God deals with impossible situations.

Just a quick note here before we go any further: Many Christians (conservative and liberal) often raise this question about my sermons: Why does he always have to talk about politics? Please notice, if you will, that I am just doing like Luke. Luke starts off with the political, and then he moves to the personal. Look at how Luke starts off. Look at Verse 5.

“In the days of King Herod of Judea” – that’s political – and to Theophilus back in Verse 3 to whom Luke is writing, as well as to everybody else who would hear or read Luke’s Gospel in the first century, Luke not only started off with the political. By saying “King Herod of Judea,” Luke starts his narrative with what we call in our day “a hot mess.”

King Herod the Great was bad news for everybody in Judea who was not a Roman. Herod was half Jew and half Idumaeon. He was an illegal puppet, handpicked by the Supreme Court (I mean handpicked by those in power, the Romans). Herod had made himself useful to the Romans in the wars and the civil wars in Palestine, and the Romans trusted Herod the Great. You have got to be careful when your enemy picks somebody who looks like you to be over you, but whose allegiance is to the enemy.

That is who Herod the Great was. He was bad news politically. Herod murdered his own wife, Mariamne, and her mother, Alexandra. Herod had three of his own sons assassinated, and this is this same Herod who kills all of the baby boys two years of age and younger just a little later on in Luke’s Gospel story. I am sorry if you don’t like me mentioning politics in my sermons, but blame it on Luke. Luke starts off with the political.

John and Jesus are about to be born into a time of political chaos and confusion. John and Jesus are about to be born into what anybody in his or her rightful mind would call an impossible situation. You have a king who is crazy (Luke says a head of state who can order the murder of innocent civilians, not enemy troops). A commander-in-chief who can do whatever he wants and who does not have to answer to anybody. That is Herod the Great. A megalomaniac who can kill at will.

Luke starts off telling you what the political lay of the land is. In the days of King Herod of Judea, he writes..., and then after starting off with the political, Luke moves to the personal. Luke just calls a name, “Herod the Great,” and images of chaos and confusion come to mind. (A man who murders his own wife, a man who murders his own sons – three of them – a man who murders infants and toddlers, all in the name of Herod’s Homeland Security.) Luke just calls one name, and the hearers of that name in the first century know that he has just conjured up an image of an impossible political situation. But then Luke moves from the political to the personal, and that’s what I want to do.

Luke moved to the personal because no matter how impossible the political situation may seem to be (or may actually be), Luke knew that there were some hearers then (just like there are some hearers now) who were (and are) living in the midst of some impossible personal situations. Look at the impossible personal situation that Luke lays out for us in this text. Luke says there was a priest named Zechariah, and his wife was named Elizabeth, and Luke says that these were good people. Both of them, both Zechariah and Elizabeth, were righteous before God living blamelessly according to all of the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

Verse 6 says that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people, and look how Verse 7 starts. *But!* (I love this text because it teaches me that we can be good people and still find ourselves in impossible situations.) The whole Book of Job teaches us the same truth that Luke teaches us in two verses. We always end up trying to figure out, like Job's friend, what we do to get into such an impossible situation. What signs did we miss? What messages did we not hear? We must have done something. We must have left something undone that we should have done.

Job's friends even suggested that maybe he had some secret sin that he had not confessed, and we will take that notion and run a four-minute mile with it. Oh yeah. Oh I remember now. Oh no, I had forgotten all about that. One of my friends in the Deacon Ministry asked me many years ago, "Rev, did you ever have one of those, oh, 'what-the-heck nights'? Stuff you done forgot all about, people's names you can't even remember?"

You ain't confessed it because you done forgot all about it. Maybe that's what caused this trouble that's coming into my life. We operate on a cause-and-effect logic. We think we must have done something that has put us into this impossible personal situation. I love this text, however, because it teaches that we can be good people and still find ourselves in impossible personal situations.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people, but they were in an impossible personal situation. They had no children because Elizabeth was barren. Barren means Elizabeth was not capable of bearing children. Barren means she and her husband would never be the parents of any children. That is bad enough, but the double whammy comes in the last phrase of that sentence. Look at it. Elizabeth was barren, and they were both getting on in years. Now that is a nice biblical way of saying, "We are both past the age of being able to make any babies. My get-up- and-go done got up and gone. Been gone – and my wife doesn't have what she needs to have if we are going to have any children." Zechariah and Elizabeth were in an impossible situation, and in this message about how God deals with impossible situations, I want you to look with me at the issue of perceiving.

"To perceive" means becoming aware of through the senses – Zechariah's senses: his physical senses and his mental senses. He became aware of the impossibility of his personal situation through his senses and through Elizabeth's senses: she was getting on in years; she was past the age of childbearing. Months and months and years and years of barrenness taught her through her physical senses that it was impossible for her to have a baby. The perception was that it was impossible.

The perception was that there was no way. The perception was that their opportunity had passed, and I need to stop right here and come away from Jerusalem.

I need to stop right here and come away from the Judean town and the hill country where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. I need to come away from there and minister for just a little while right here. Not by the Sea of Galilee, but by the ocean called the Atlantic. Somebody reading this sermon needs to see this point Luke makes. You are a good person, and you are in the midst of an impossible personal situation. I don't know who you are, but God knows who you are, and God providentially arranged for you to be reading this message right now, hearing from God and not from me.

The perception is that in your personal situation, what you want is impossible. I don't mean your fairytale wish list situation. I mean the desires of your heart that are consistent with the Will of God. The perception is that the possibility of that happening is nonexistent. The perception is that there is no way. The perception is that your opportunity has passed. Perceiving, becoming aware of the harsh facts of your situation through your senses has you convinced that your situation is impossible, and somebody reading this message has lived long enough to know that for many of us, perception, how we perceive, perception, is 100 percent fact.

Well that may be how it operates in the human arena, but that is not how it operates in the divine arena. You keep on praying! You do just like Zechariah did, and in the face of your impossible situation, you keep on praying. Why? Because for God, faith outweighs fact. For humans, perception is 100 percent fact, but for God, faith outweighs fact. Examine the scriptures with me.

The facts said that Sarah was also past the childbearing years, but faith said, if God says it can be so, it will be so. Where God is concerned, God honors faith in spite of the facts. The facts said that the Egyptian army far outnumbered the raggedy band and the mixed multitude that Moses was leading. The Egyptians were skilled. They were experienced, and they were superior to the struggling stragglers who were dressed up for battle but who had not fought anybody in 400 years. The Egyptian army under Pharaoh was like the United States military under Bush. They were the most powerful fighting machine anybody ever had to face. That's what the facts said, but guess what? God honors faith and sometimes God honors faith in spite of the facts. Moses had the faith to stretch out his rod. Moses had the faith to "stand still and see the salvation of the Lord," and that skilled force, that experienced force, that superior force, the most powerful fighting machine anybody ever had to face, they all got drowned because of one man's faith. God honors faith in spite of the facts.

The facts said Goliath was a skilled warrior who had been fighting for more years than David was old. The facts said that David was a shepherd and Goliath was a soldier. That's what the facts said. The facts said that a slingshot is no match for a seven foot sword. That's what the facts said, but the faith of the one who said, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...", the faith of the one who said, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear. The Lord is the strength of my life of whom shall I be afraid," his faith enabled him to do what the facts said were impossible. God honors faith in spite of facts.

The facts say that fire burns. The facts say that fire kills. The facts caused the ones heating up the furnace to get wiped out before they could put anybody in, but the faith of the three Hebrew boys said, "The God we serve is able to deliver us from out of your furnace and from out of your hand." The faith of the Hebrew boys

said, "But even if our God does not deliver us, we still will not serve your gods," and their faith caused the fourth one to get in the furnace with them, and the King said that the fourth one looked like the Son of God. God honors faith in spite of the facts.

Let me give you some historical examples if the biblical examples have not convinced you. The facts said Harriet Tubman was a slave for life. The facts said Harriet was born a slave and Harriet would die a slave. The facts said that all of the racist laws of this land from the Circuit Court to the Supreme Court were stacked against Harriet, so she would never be free. But her faith not only got her free, her faith made her make nineteen trips back into the South to free over 300 more Africans, and her words are a haunting reminder of the impossible social situations we are in today. Harriet said, "I could have freed more, if they had only wanted to be free."

God honored Harriet's faith in spite of the Supreme Court's facts. The facts said that after 246 years of legalized slavery, legalized segregation, lynching, rapes, and inferior schools and housing, the Africans in Diaspora and North America were doomed to mediocrity at best and inferiority at worst. That's what the facts said. But, faith produced a Black Nobel Peace Prize winner named Martin King. Faith produced a Siamese-twin-separating Black brain surgeon called Ben Carson. Faith produced a Black female astronaut called Mae Jemison.

Faith produced a Black female Bishop in the Episcopal church and three Black female Bishops in the sexist African Methodist Episcopal church. Faith produced a 42-year-old Black Senator in the United States Congress as a sign of hope in the same year that the Presidential Election caused many people to despair. God honors faith in spite of the facts, and God honored Zechariah's faith in spite of what all of the facts said.

The facts in our text said there was a problem. Age was a problem, but God cares more about prayer than God cares about problems. You keep on praying. Look at what the message of God during this season of Advent says. The message of God says in Verse 13, "Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will name him John." Zechariah kept on praying to the Almighty in spite of the problem of age, and that is why this message of God is saying the same thing to you who are reading it today.

You keep on praying. God cares more about prayer than God cares about problems. You keep on praying. No matter how bad it looks, you keep on praying. No matter how impossible it may seem to you, you keep on praying. No matter what the facts say, you keep on praying. I want to give you three lessons from the text about the issue of perceiving. Perception is 100% fact for many folk, but lesson number one from this text says that God honors faith in spite of the facts. Lesson number two says: God cares more about prayer than God cares about problems, so no matter what the problem is, you keep on praying.

But, finally this text teaches me that God answers prayer, and God overrules problems. God says in so many words, "Zechariah, your prayer has been heard, and I have come with the answer." I am a living witness that God answers prayer and overrules problems. I created more problems in my ministry, in my personal life, in my pastorate, and in my family's life than you could ever imagine, but I had a praying mama, and I had a praying daddy who kept on praying in spite of

the problems. They asked the Lord to be a fence all around me while I was acting a fool. They asked the Lord to be a hedge of protection all around me when I was too stupid to know that I needed protection. The Lord heard their prayer because of their faith. God honors faith in spite of the facts.

One of the reasons I love that story about those men taking their friend who was paralyzed to Jesus and not being able to get into the house because of the crowd is because it teaches the same principle. I love that story not because of the details, and the details are exciting. You remember the story! His friends went to the front door of the house where Jesus was, and the crowd was so thick they couldn't get through the front door, so they went around back. They would not be outdone. When they got around back, the crowd was so thick back there that they couldn't get in the back door either, so they went to the side windows, and the side windows had folks leaning in the windows and leaning out of the windows. They could not get in the windows, but they still would not give up. They climbed up on the roof, carrying their friend up on the roof with them, tore the roof off the sucker, and let their friend down at the feet of Jesus.

Now, the details are exciting, yes, but that's not why I love the story. The story says when Jesus saw their faith, he did something for the man who had not asked Him for a thing. When the Lord saw my mama's faith, when the Lord saw my father's faith, in spite of the problems I was creating, God honored their faith in spite of my facts. God heard their prayer because God cares more about prayer than about problems, and God (I know from personal experience), God answers prayer and overrules problems.

Somebody reading this message also knows that God answers prayers and overrules problems! You have had personal experiences that taught you (as my experiences taught me) that your faith was in a God who cares more about your prayer than about your problems. You have had personal experience with a Lord who honors faith in spite of the facts. And you have had personal experience with the Lord who answers prayer and overrules problems.

That is the message of Advent, the message of hope, and the message I give to you this day.

Closing Prayer

During this season of Advent, O God, in a time of chaos and confusion (political and personal), and with many of us feeling as if we are trapped in impossible situations, we have looked at how You deal with impossible situations. First we looked at the issue of perceiving. For many of us perception is 100 percent fact, but for You, O God, faith outweighs fact.

You, O God, honor faith in spite of the facts. You are a God who is more concerned about our prayers than our problems, and You are a God who will answer prayer in spite of our problems. As we thank you, Oh God, for the message, we thank you for this season and what it promises in terms of hope in spite of what appears to be hopeless times. Bless now your people as they go from this place of worship into the world that you love. Bless every home. May your love that is unconditional, your grace that is still sufficient, and your peace that passes all understanding surround them and sustain them through Christ our Lord.