

Nothing Is Impossible!
December 19, 2021

Good morning, Church, and Merry Christmas! One of my favorite activities as a pastor is the privilege of welcoming people into the church family. And this morning is the very first time I've had that privilege here at Central. Yes, indeed! Now, there is no un-awkward way of doing this. There's lots of ways of doing this and, God willing and the creek don't rise, we're gonna do it differently every time and we'll get good at it. But we have five people that are joining us this morning. What I'm going to do is bring their certificates out to them because, you see, I'm an introvert. You wouldn't know it by watching me up here, but I'm an introvert. And if I had to come up here to join, I probably wouldn't. So, I would invite them to stay right where they are. Danny, are you here? Vannie Irvin? Yes, there she is. Danny, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome! Fred and Lori Lieske, where are you at? Welcome! Please stand. Alright! Welcome, welcome, welcome, guys! Dave and Carol, would you please stand? This is Dave and Carol Larkin who are joining us. God bless you. We make you guys an old southern promise that is: we'll treat you so many ways, you're bound to like some of them.

I want to read a passage of scripture. This comes from the book of Luke, chapter 1.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

May God bless the reading of His Word.

The first baby, born to someone in a church that I served, happened in my very first congregation and it was my pianist who got pregnant. And they were just a such a delightful couple. You know, there's one of those one of those couples that when you think of them, a smile automatically comes to your face. This was over 40 years ago and every time I think of them, I have to smile. Very gregarious people, fun-loving, they smiled always, laughed often. She was just as sweet as she could possibly be and he was an absolute bear. He was huge, 6'4", 6'5", and a biscuit under or over 300 pounds. Jet black hair that he kept cut really short, but he had this big boofy beard about this big and it hung down about halfway on his chest, just as black as it could possibly be. And they were going to have their very first baby. Most people are happy when they're going to be having their first child, and they were just absolutely ecstatic. And then they started taking birthing classes and they became obnoxious. Because they were telling us (now you have to remember that this was a small church. When everybody was there, there was only 40 people) and so we all got to hear the story of what they were learning in Lamaze classes. And you know, there's these different

stages of birth; and if you breathe this way in this stage and you breathe that way in that stage and you rub here and you rub there, it's not that bad. (Hahaha!) And by the time that it was time for that child to get here, we were all just ready for that child to be here. And she said, "Now, Pastor, when I go into labor it'll be a long time before that baby's born. So, as soon as I find out that I'm in labor, I'm gonna call you and we want you to come to the hospital and have a prayer with us while we're waiting for the baby to be born." "All right. Okay." So, one Saturday, it surprised me because it was like two o'clock in the afternoon, I get this call. And it's this guy and he says, "Her waters broke and she's in labor. Get here!" So I said, "Okay," and I got ready. And the hospital is about 45 minutes away. And I drove to the hospital and I got there and about an hour has passed. And I get to the hospital and I go to the Labor and Delivery and they won't let just anybody into Labor and Delivery. I had to prove who I was and that I was a pastor and yada yada yada. And I went down to her room and her parents were outside the door. And I told them who I was. "Oh yeah, they're expecting you. Just go on in." Well, I opened the door and closed it just as a major contraction hit. And he was leaning over her with a hand on each side of her saying, "Breathe now, breathe like this, breathe like this." And she reaches up and grabs two handfuls of beard. She pulls him down in her face and she says, "I want an epidural!" So, the natural childbirth just went right out the window.

Several years ago, I did my very first Congolese wedding. I had a lot of Congolese refugees in our last church and I did my first Congolese wedding. And that is quite an affair. I mean, most of the afternoon, all of the evening, and part of the night, it's a huge party. And during the reception, they were asked, "How many children do you want to have?" And they said, "Twelve." Do you think you've got a big family? Twelve, they wanted twelve kids. So, it wasn't long after they got married that they had their first baby and Jeannine and I went to the hospital to visit her. And the Congolese community called my wife, "Mama Pastor, Mama Pastor." And so we walk into the room and she's smiling. She's got the baby. She says, "Mama Pastor, one baby is enough." I said, "Really? You said you wanted twelve." She said, "No! One!"

There's a paradox in having children, is there not? There's joy and pain. There's a paradox in being blessed, too, being blessed by God. Paul said it was a great, great honor to be chosen worthy of suffering for the cause of Christ. There's a paradox of the gifts, the spiritual gifts that we are given. I tell folks, with most spiritual gifts there's an angel and a demon. There's an angel that brings great joy and there's a demon that brings great pain. I think of the gift of mercy that my wife has, that it is a great blessing in that she can sense other people's pain that people around her can't sense. But feeling that pain can be wearing and tearing. In our story today, we have the story of two women, Elizabeth and Mary, who were blessed by God and it is through their blessing that God blessed the world. And we tend to idealize what happened to these two. But this is the real world and these women endured a great deal to bless us. Elizabeth was married, thought to be barren. For years and years and years she prayed for a baby. In that era if you did not have children, if you were married and did not have children, you were thought to be guilty of some secret sin and you were

pitied. And for years she endured that scorn, that stigma and that pity. Finally, blessed by God, she conceives and bears John, John who would become John the Baptist. But there's no indication that Elizabeth or Zechariah lived long enough to see John become John, the Baptizer. And if they did, they would have heard that their baby boy was beheaded in prison. Blessed by God.

And then there is Mary. She, of all people, must have been one phenomenal human being to be chosen for this great blessing. But it wasn't all peaches and cream for Mary, either. Mary probably was 14 to 16 years of age, engaged but not married. And an angel appears to her, and this is the Mars paraphrase of that conversation. Gabriel says, "You are blessed of God. You are going to have a baby." She says, "Yeah, well, thank you very much. I'm engaged and one day I will." And he goes, "No, you're gonna have a baby. Now. Before you get married." She says, "Well, how can I be, because I'm a virgin." He says, "The daddy is going to be God." She, being a godly, righteous person, says, "Let it be as you have said." Now, that's the first answer. The second one in her head is, "How am I going to tell Joseph?" I'm serious. "How am I going to tell Joseph?" That conversation, I could just hear her saying, "Now Joseph, sweetheart, don't jump to any conclusions but I'm pregnant and the father is God." "Yeah, right." How do you think he responded? And you see, she had to endure that before an angel appeared to Joseph and said, "It's okay." And then, when Jesus matured and began his ministry, there was a point in his ministry where Mary and her other children thought Jesus had lost his mind. And they went to get him physically and bring him home. They were not successful, but they tried. And then she had to endure the sight of her son on a cross. Blessed by God.

Yes, we know the rest of the story, but they had to endure a great deal to be blessed. They believed, they believed that with God, anything is possible. The barren can conceive and the virgin can give birth. But being blessed of God can be a mixed bag. These women believed and were blessed by God and through them God blessed the world. But there was great joy and there was great sorrow. Being chosen of God means joy and suffering. Being called, being chosen, being blessed of God are all one and the same. We're not chosen for our own comfort. We're not chosen for convenience. We are not chosen for pleasure. And trust me when I tell you, God is not going to consult your calendar. We're chosen for a task, both great and small. You'll note, I didn't say important and unimportant, because there's no such thing as unimportant tasks in the kingdom of God. Some of the smallest tasks in the world have the most profound impact. And some of the great ones seem to have very little, but there are no unimportant tasks. I recall a story about a pastor of a small midwestern town who bought his shoes from the same young shoe salesman. He developed a relationship with the young man and then developed a friendship with the young man and then was able to lead that young man to Christ. It happens all the time, people sharing their faith with one another. This young shoe salesman's name was Billy Graham.

We are not chosen to make our life easy, but we are chosen to contribute to the kingdom of God. We are chosen for great joy and a great task. The joy is in knowing that we are part of God's plan. Jesus does not call us to make our lives easy, but to

make our lives matter. Let me say that again. Jesus does not call us, does not choose us, does not bless us to make our lives easy, but rather to make our lives matter. These two women believed that with God all things are possible. The barren can conceive and the virgin can give birth. And they were willing to be blessed by God, to accept the joy and the pain, the task and the sorrow, to be a blessing. We're preparing to remember, to recognize, to celebrate that great blessing that God blessed the earth with through these beautiful women. The question I pose to us, all of us, is number one, do you believe that God can bless you? Do you believe that you can be a blessing and are you willing to pay the price for that blessing? Elizabeth was, Mary was, and as a result, we are here today. We are blessed because of these women's laughter and their tears. My challenge for all of us today is to be a blessing. Say, "Lord, I believe that You can bless me and I want to be a blessing, no matter what the cost."

I want to close with a prayer. Back in the olden days, this prayer was read at every ordination service for a United Methodist minister. It's not done anymore, but this one was read at every ordination service and I want you to listen to the words very carefully. This is called the Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition.

"I am no longer my own, but Thine. Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by Thee or laid aside by Thee, exalted for Thee or brought low for Thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to Thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Thou art mine and I am Thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven."

So, I pray that God will give us the courage to say, "Lord, I want to be blessed. I want to be blessed so that I can be a blessing. And I freely and I heartily embrace the joy and I will endure the pain to be a blessing." Let's pray.

Lord, this is such a blessed time of the year, but the blessings that we enjoy were costly and they came at great price and great sacrifice. And there were those who were willing to pay that price. We pray that during this blessed time, that we might have the courage to be a blessing, too. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.