A STORY THAT SEEMS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE
LUKE 1:5-56
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I. An Unimaginable Scenario
II. An Inconceivable Idea
III. An Openhearted Response

Last week we kicked off our tour through the book of Luke in the Bible and we kicked it off by going through his introduction which basically says, “Hey, I’m gonna tell you a story, it’s a great story and one of the greatest things about it is that it happens to be true.”

This week, we’re going to look at a pretty sizable chunk of text where Luke sets up his story and right away what we’re confronted with is some pretty crazy stuff which sort of makes you pause and think…” Hold on, really?” Because right off the bat, as Luke starts telling his story it sounds like a story that seems too good to be true.

So that’s what I titled my message today, “A Story That Seems Too Good To Be True.” There are lots of stories out there like that and the truth is we kind of like those kinds of stories, don’t we?

Stories like the story of Charlie, a young boy who grows up very poor, lives with his old dying grandparents. He happens to find a candy bar wrapper with a golden ticket in it, which means he gets to go take a tour of the most fantastic chocolate factory ever built. When he gets there he meets up with this group of other kids who all found golden tickets too. They walk through the factory encountering all these cool inventions and creatures, like the Oompa Loompa and all they have to do is not break any of the rules and Willy Wonka plans to give that kid the entire factory.

Great story right? We love it. And why do we love it? Because it seems too good to be true…and that’s what we long for, for the seemingly impossible to actually be a reality.

That’s kind of what our story from Luke for today sets up. It’s a fun story about this wild promise of God, which ends with a little girl being very very happy. And what Luke invites us to believe in it is that faith in God, not fear and doubt, can give us the same joy this little girl experiences. It’s a story about how through Jesus, we can all inherit the chocolate factory.

With that, let’s read our text for today and jump into it. Here at our church, we believe God had these stories were recorded for us for all time in the Bible so that through them we might come to know and love Him and each other. So in honor and recognition of that why don’t you all stand with me today as I read, then we’ll thank God for it and pray over our time in it.

Luke 1:5-56
In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.
And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom, there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “ Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has
scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his offspring forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Pastoral Declaration: This is the Word of the Lord.
Congregational Response: Thanks Be To God.
Pastoral Prayer

Alright. We’ve got characters: Zach, Liz, and Mary. Zach hears about God’s promise to give him a son who will introduce people to Jesus the savior but he doesn’t believe God at first and is afraid so God makes it so He can’t talk for awhile. Mary finds out from an angel she is going to be the mother of Jesus, the savior. Liz, her cousin is really happy for her and Mary is so happy she sings a song to God. Great story. I’ve got three things I think would be helpful for us to talk about from it today, imagination, conceivability, and openheartedness.

I. An Unimaginable Scenario

So our first point this morning is “An Unimaginable Scenario” and with it what I want to point out is just kind of the craziness of this story…but also why that’s good. You see, what Luke basically does here, right off the bat is set up this story that seems totally impossible which means you have to try and use your imagination to even think about it.

He kind of stacks the deck doesn’t he? There’s an angel who shows up talking, says this virgin is gonna get pregnant without ever having sex and then the baby that she has is going to be the son of God, who will rule as king forever. We hear that and what’s our natural, normal human response? Yeah, right!

Right? You see, if you’re here and you’re not a Christian and you’ve got doubts about God and the Bible and all the crazy things it says, you’re in a good place. We get that. And I actually think Luke, the guy who God had write down this story, I think he got that too. He’s not dumb. He was a medical doctor. So he’s just putting his cards on the table and it’s kind of like him saying look, “You’re not going to believe this but you gotta hear this story.”

It’s true for us today that this story sounds crazy and it was true for people back then when this was originally written.

First, we got Zach, the priest. He’s supposedly a good guy. He’s the religious guy. But when God sends His angel and tells him that even though he’s all old and gray, he’s going to have a son named John who will be the first prophet in 400 years and that his son will introduce people to the savior of the world. What’s Zach’s response? Yeah, right?

Check it out. When the angel first shows up, what’s his response? Fear. Verse 12 says, “He was troubled when he saw (the angel) and fear fell upon him.” Then after the angel tries to calm him down and to give him some more details, what his response? Verse 18 says he basically rebuffs the angel in disbelief. He says, “How can I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advance in years.”
That pisses the angel off who I imagine in a loud voice responds saying, “I am Gabriel...and God sent me to tell you he's gonna do this so shut up!” And he literally shuts Zach’s mouth up so he can’t talk until he believes.

Side note lesson, if you ever do see an angel, it's probably not a good idea to tell him he's crazy and wrong. And, the religious people, people who are supposedly the good guys, the good Christians, they’re not always right about everything. Sometimes people who say they believe in God can say and do some pretty dumb stuff.

That’s Zach. Then we’ve got Mary. The same angel shows up to her. Tells her that even though she’s a virgin, probably around 13, 14 or 15 which is when girls would typically get engaged back then, that tough she’s a virgin she was gonna get pregnant.

And Luke emphasizes this. He says multiple time that she was a virgin, who was betrothed. Betrothal back then meant her dad had already paid a bride price, and it was a legal contract that could not be broken. And if she had sexual relations with anyone before the wedding that would have been considered adultery and been grounds for legal action.

So once we’ve got this crazy scenario. In the first case, a barren senior citizen is gonna get pregnant. In the second case, a virgin teenager is gonna get pregnant and still be a virgin afterward. Uh...yeah, right!

It was hard for Mary to believe and accept but her question to the angel is very different, she asks in faith how God is going to do this? Zach made more of a statement of disbelief. Mary accepts it and says, “Okay, how?”

The angel basically says God is gonna do a miracle and because He’s God He can do anything, nothing is impossible. And then Mary offers this wonderful statement of surrender and trust in God in verse 38 and says, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

What we have here are two characters, Zach and Mary, with two very different responses. Zach has fear, so he doesn’t believe. Mary has faith, so she receives.

When we look at them, what is the difference? How was it that Mary believed and Zach didn’t. It wasn’t because either one of them was better. Zach, Luke tells us was a righteous God, who walked with God and followed God’s commandments.

Mary, Luke tells us was simply a girl whom God had favor on, which is a way of saying it wasn’t anything about her or anything she did to make God like her, he just had favor on her.

When we look at the difference between them, what stands out to me is imagination.

Zach could not imagine this scenario, he couldn’t picture in his mind his old wife getting pregnant and having a son that would introduce the world to the savior. He couldn’t imagine it.

Mary could imagine it. When the angel shared with her what God was going to do, Mary thought about it, imagined herself pregnant with the Son of God, and could picture the scenario in her mind’s eye, so she said okay.
Even the angel seems to point to the imagination. He says, “Nothing is impossible with God.” That means, “use your imagination.” Whatever you think of, God can do. He can do it all.

For us, I think it’s important to recognize that the often the difference between fear and faith is our imagination. When we have fear, we’re afraid because we can’t imagine that God is real and is with us and for us and so in all the scenarios of our mind, we think everything will go wrong. When we have faith, we are able to imagine God and imagine Him acting for us on our behalf for our good.

It’s interesting. The whole story of the Bible really requires imagination. From its first pages, we hear the story of God creating and you can’t read that story without imagining it all going down.

Then we read the story of the first man and woman and how they believed lies about God, imagining He didn’t love them and wasn’t for them, which leads to them being kicked out of the garden. You can’t read that story and not imagine it happening like a movie in your mind.

What Luke offers us here at the beginning of his story about Jesus is to imagine, that from the very beginning, before Jesus was even born, fantastic stuff was happening. He invites us to picture all of this in our mind and to get wrapped up into it in hopes that we might see our fears about God shrink and our faith in God increase.

Imagination is important. Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” He said, “Knowledge is limited. Imagination enriches the world.” It’s really because of imagination, imagining what might be possible that has led to so many great discoveries...medical discoveries, technology discoveries, even the discovery of God.

So maybe you’re not a Christian yet but just imagine with us for a bit. Imagine there’s a God and imagine He was going to make a grand entrance into the world. What do you think He might do? Might it be something like this?

How’s your imagination? Imagination is meant to fuel our faith. Too often we’re afraid to believe. We’re afraid to dream. We’re afraid to be ourselves. We’re afraid to follow God. What God calls us to is faith in Him which frees us and brings us joy.

Il. An Inconceivable Idea

To understand a little more about this faith we see in Mary, let’s move on to our second point for today, “An Inconceivable Idea.” What I want to get into here is plausibility.

One of the things we talked about last week is that faith in the Bible is not some spiritual blind leap into the dark where you believe something there’s really no reason or evidence to. And that’s true here in this story. It may be a fantastic story. It may be a story that really requires the stretch of our imagination, but it does give us some handholds, some reasons so that we can plausibly conceive that it actually might be true.

UCSD up the street is one of the worlds centers for the study of brain neurology and one the things really cool discoveries of late is understanding the differences between the left and right sides of the brain. The left side is where we process logic, linear ideas, and linguistics. But the right side is where we process images, sensations, and emotions.
With that, what psychological experts are now saying is that through the use of our imagination, the left and right sides work together enabling us to construct reality forming the story of who we are and what the world we live in is like. So our last point was us basically tapping the left side of the brain, with this point, we let’s tap the right a bit.

One thing a lot of people wonder about the Bible is if it’s just some story some guys made up. Which is a fair question. But when you actually read the stories, like Luke’s here, you begin to notice some things that aren’t too story like.

For example, verse 5 instead of saying, “once upon a time” cites the exact time in history when all of this went down, “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” Then, it doesn’t just say, “there was a man named Zechariah.” It cites details about him, that he was a “priest” who worked in “the division of Abijah”. And then it gives us details that those who are making up a story don’t give like the angel was “on the right side of the altar.”

Same thing with Mary. We’re told it was in the “sixth month” that the angel Gabriel came. And that she was in “Galilee”, then went to her cousin’s and stayed there “three months.” You see, Luke’s telling a story but he tells it with specificity, showing that it’s a story but also actual history.

Luke was a doctor. A researcher. A seeker of truth. It mattered a lot to him. But when he encountered the story of Jesus he was challenged and it seems that this challenge was so big to him that he puts it front and center right here in his first chapter. The challenge was whether or not he could believe Jesus was actually God in the flesh. Whether that was something that could conceivably happen. So he gets after it here right away.

Really, this is the whole climax of chapter one, it’s what Mary being a virgin is all about and it’s what verse 32 pointedly declares about Jesus. The angel says this about Jesus,“He will great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and this kingdom there will be no end.”

So Jesus is the Son of the Most High, a way of referring to God. He’s a King, greater than the greatest Jewish king who ever lived, King David. And He’ll be a king who reigns forever and ever for all eternity.

When Mary asks about how all this is going to go down the angel repeats these astounding claims about the person and nature of Jesus saying in verse 35 that he “will be called holy - the Son of God.”

Luke doesn’t waste any time in his book, right away here in the first chapter, his readers are confronted with the claim and question of whether or not Jesus was and is actually God, in human flesh? That’s Luke’s question. Is it conceivable? Is it possible? Could it be?

He’s got the whole scene with Mary and the angel repeatedly saying she’s a virgin who gets pregnant with God inside her and then just in case we don’t miss the point, he adds this second little mini story with Mary’s cousin Liz who’s pregnant, where both Liz and her baby recognize that the baby inside Mary is the son of God. Liz calls Mary’s baby Lord and little John jumps up and down for joy.

So what about the question, is it conceivable? If there is a God who created everything, is it possible that He came to earth in Jesus entering the womb of a little teenager girl, becoming a little baby?
Luke puts the logic before us with Mary’s question when she asks how? She asks the angel how God is going to do this? What’s the angel’s response? What’s he say?

Does the angel get out an easel, put up a whiteboard, start drawing some diagrams and explains the space-time continuum and say to Mary, “You see, God as a Spirit exists in an uncircumscribable presence as an omnipotent force. What He’s going to do is temporarily suspend the physiological laws of the universe He created, so that He can incarnate, attaching to His immortal self the physical components of human flesh and bone, resulting in a theanthropic physical baby, and all the while still retain His power and presence over all the universe as God.” Make sense Mary?

No, the angel doesn’t do that. He just says God’s Holy Spirit would overshadow her, in an instant put God inside her and that God can do it because with God all things are possible. It’s pretty sound logic.

If you’re God and created all the physical laws of the universe you can break them any time you wish and do anything that you want. That’s why if there is, in fact, a God, then none of the miracles the Bible claims to have taken place are impossibilities. It’s all conceivable. It’s all plausible.

We’re not crazy to think that. It’s not crazy to think that there’s a God who could do that. What’s actually crazier is the why, why He would do it? Because if there is a God who can do all things then why does He care about us? Why does God care so much about human beings to do this great feat?

These words, “Nothing is impossible with God” are great words for our soul. They stand out jumping off the page to us. God can do all things. And God cares.

Every one of us in our lives has questions and fears and desires. What this story tells us is no matter what they are there is hope in God. If God could and would become a little baby in order to reach us and save us then there’s nothing He can’t do and won’t do for me so that I might know Him.

I’m confident of that this morning. We don’t always know exactly what we need but I’m confident that if we turn to God, He will always give us what we need. Nothing is impossible for Him.

Where are you at today? Is there something you need from God?

Just ask Him. God coming to our world in Jesus tells us He cares.

Listen, you can’t conceive of a better God. We can’t even dream one up. You can think of what the greatest and best God would be. He would have all power. But usually, power corrupts. But the for the best God it wouldn’t. He would care and come to save His creatures when they needed it most.

The God of the Bible is a good, good God. That’s what Mary finds herself believing and singing.

Let’s look at that in our last point for today, “An Openhearted Response.”
III. An Openhearted Response

With this last point what I want to look into is Mary’s song. Verses 46-55 records this song of praise to God that Mary writes after digesting and believing all the angel told her then feeling and seeing the physical proof of it in her growing belly.

Scientific studies have shown that singing releases endorphins and oxytocin in the brain which are basically the two happy chemicals. And you pick that up in Mary’s song. She’s really really happy. And that tells us something.

If you think through the story and try and put yourself in her shoes, how do you think you’d feel? A young teenage girl, who’s engaged to this guy, but all of the sudden ends up pregnant. What do you think a girl in that situation might normally feel?

Shame, guilt, fear, right? I mean, she’s probably going to think that no one will believe her and that she’s lying. No, I swear I didn’t sleep with anyone, it was God! People for sure shamed her, which doesn’t feel good. We know for a fact that her betrothed Joseph didn’t believe her at first and was going to divorce her until an angel showed up to tell him that Mary was telling the truth.

Guilt probably, like “Why’s this happening to me?” What did I do wrong to deserve all of this? She could’ve thought and felt like this was the worst thing that ever happened to her.

Fear, fear for sure about how it was all going to work out. Fear of the unknown and whether they’d be okay. All the normal stuff that goes along with any pregnancy, not to mention being pregnant with God inside you!

Isn’t that what we’d expect, for Mary to be filled with fear, guilt, and shame?

For so many of us, stuff happens in life that cripples us and most of the time in some way or another it’s connected to one of those things. Fear about what others will think of us or do to us. Guilt about our failures, mistakes, and misjudgments. Shame about things people have done to us making us feel worthless or less than.

There’s a lot of fear and blame going around these days aren’t there?

That’s how we’d expect Mary to react. But she doesn’t. Instead, we see her respond with this openhearted joy. Why? What was it about Jesus being birthed inside her that gave her such joy?

I think there are a couple hints in a few of the lines she shares.

First, verse 46-47, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”

Wow! Doesn’t that just sound good? To have your soul satisfied and rejoicing.

Then she gives reasons for why she feels that way.

Verse 48, “For he looked on the humble estate of his servant.”

Verse 49, “He who is mighty has done great things.”
Verse 50, “His mercy is for those who fear him.”

In these lines, we get a sense of how she sees herself. She sees herself as someone who doesn’t deserve anything but that God has done something great for her anyway and had mercy on her. She saw herself as someone who needed a savior. She came to believe that God cared specifically for her and provided that for her in Jesus.

But she also saw that Jesus was for others too. After she speaks about how she personally has been blessed she turns her attention to others, recognizing how the baby in her belly would be a blessing for all peoples.

Verse 52, “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble of state.”

Verse 53, “He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away hungry.”

Verse 55, “He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his offspring forever.”

Mary understood that the same favor God showed her would be shown through Jesus to all kinds of people for all time. In Jesus God birthed a savior who would bring about these great role reversals.

It’s not the proud and exalted who are favored but the humble who acknowledge their need for mercy.

It’s the poor who are blessed with God’s goodness, not the rich who have it all together.

It’s not just one person or a few people from one race but for people throughout all generations forever.

This is the Jesus Luke shows us. One who comes to engage all people. And Mary knew Jesus would be that way from the start. He’d care not just about men but women and children and old people too. He’d care and reach out to not just the rich but also the poor, hungry and hurting. He’d care and welcome not just Jews but people of all races and colors of skin.

Instead of being afraid and letting fear, guilt, and shame get the best of her, she believes, embraces God’s promise and is filled with joy and excitement about what that means for her and for all kinds of people everywhere.

For us, what Mary provides is a perfect model of how we can open our hearts toward God and have joy. Twice she calls herself a “servant” of God. First, when the angel tells her all things are possible with God, she says, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord” and then in her song, she says God has, “looked upon the humble estate of his servant.”

When we read a story like this in the Bible I think we can’t help but ask, who are we in the story? We’ve kind of got two options. We can either be obstinate like Zach and have to go through some tough things in life until we’re ready to believe and sing praise to God. Or we can be openhearted like Mary, where we believe, receive the gift of Jesus and sing as servants dedicated to Him and His work.
To be God’s servant means we give up all on all our pride, our attempts to save ourselves, our attempts to find happiness in life apart from God and we surrender all that we have to Him. We surrender and become His servants and in that find great joy.

**Conclusion**

Well, it’s been a good day hearing about all the amazing things God did just before Jesus was born.

What we’ve looked at is a story that invites us to imagine, to imagine a God who did something incredible so that we might know Him.

We’ve looked at a story that offers us reason to believe, that all things are possible with God.

And we’ve looked at a model example of what it looks like to be and become a Christian, to be open-hearted servants of God who then find great joy.

I began the sermon talking about the story of Charlie in Willy Wonka. As the movie unfold one by one you watch each of the kids on the tour breaking the rules and being kicked out. One by one each of the kids breaks the rules until it’s just Charlie left. But then, even he ends up stealing an everlasting gobstopper.

Willy Wonka is furious. But then Charlie does something unexpected, he apologizes and gives it back. Willy Wonka then forgives him and Charlie, one of the poorest kids in the entire city ends up inheriting the chocolate factory and becoming one of the richest and happiest kids who ever lived.

The story is not unlike our story. None of us have passed the test. We’ve all broken the rules. But for those of us who are humble like Mary, admitting our fallen state and our need for a savior, God blesses us and gives us His Son Jesus. We simply open our hearts to Him, give up trying to be the kings of our lives. We receive Jesus as king and offer ourselves as servants.

Today, we’re going to respond as we do each week here, by coming to the table of Jesus, offering ourselves to Him and receiving His grace and goodness.

We dip a piece of bread in the wine or the juice and in so doing are saying Jesus came into our world, lived the perfect life we’ve all failed at and then died on the cross for all our sin, all our fear, shame, and guilt and then rose again as the savior and king for all generations.

Whatever you’re afraid of, whatever you feel shame or guilt about. Lay it down. Come today and come saying I surrender all you Jesus, I’m your servant. Come and rejoice knowing that God loves you and that through Jesus our king and savior we get to know God and walk with Him.

Let’s pray.