

God told Abraham that his wife Sarah would bear a son. *How can this be?* they laughed, for we are both over 90 years old.

God told Moses that he had been chosen to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from their slavery and lead them to the Promised Land. *How can this be?* Moses argued, for I am a poor speaker, slow of speech and slow of tongue. I am such a poor salesman that I couldn't persuade an Eskimo to buy a stove, much less persuade Pharaoh to let his slaves go free.

God told Jeremiah that he was going to be a prophet who would speak to the king and people of Judah to warn them of God's impending judgment. *How can this be?* Jeremiah protested. I am just a youth. These adults will never listen to me.

When you consider these stories from the Old Testament, you see that Mary is in good company when she hears Gabriel tell her that she is going to have a son who will be the successor to King David, the long-awaited messiah who will redeem his people. *How can this be?* she asks, for I am not yet married.

Abraham & Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, and Mary. These are some of God's most effective servants. They know their world, but they also know their own limitations. They know that 90-year olds and virgins don't bear children. They know effective public speakers have to be old enough and articulate enough to command attention. Have you seen Cecil B. DeMille's epic movie *The Ten Commandments*? Remember who played Moses? Charlton Heston, one of the greatest voices of the century. But if Moses truly was inarticulate and slow of speech, Charlton Heston should not have been the choice for that role. A better choice for Moses would have been Bob Newhart. We all know that Yul Brynner (who played Pharaoh) would never have listened to Bob Newhart bumble over his words. For that matter, we can't imagine "captive Israel" listening to Bob Newhart, either. But to understand how improbable it was for God to choose Moses to be the leader of the descendants of Israel, Bob Newhart would have been a great choice.

You see, since the beginning of the story of God's people, those whom God has chosen to use as his instruments have sincerely asked, "How can this be?" The questioner is usually being both thoughtful and sensible. It's not just a matter of not wanting to do what God asks, like a son or daughter being told to pick up their room by a parent and saying, "I don't wanna do that." These are instances where what God asks them to do is clearly beyond their capabilities. It's refreshing to hear these Biblical characters say, "God I don't think you've thought this one through completely. You seem to be forgetting that I'm too old—not eloquent—too young—a virgin." And why shouldn't they respond with disbelief? If they're the ones to carry out a particular aspect of God's work, then they're the ones who need to be convinced a course of action is actually God's call, not their own fantasy. God has to reckon with their reluctance and their concerns.

We can see by these examples that God often calls on people who are not experts with obvious worldly qualifications. If they had submitted resumes for these positions, they would have never have even been called in for a first interview. Maybe God has found that the best qualified people are hard to work with. You have maybe observed that people who are absolutely sure where they are going seldom ask for directions. Not even God can lead people who will not follow. So self-reliant people may have difficulty relying on God, and they can easily slip into an unconscious arrogance, such as is evidenced by David in our First Reading.

Unlike Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, and Mary, David seems to have been a natural-born leader. He excelled at everything he did and his many accomplishments came quite easily. Our First Reading opens with a successful, wealthy, and satisfied King David in the mood to do a favor for God, almost as though

he thinks of himself as a pal or peer of God. As he relaxes in the beautiful new palace he had constructed for himself in his new capital of Jerusalem, it occurs to him that maybe an equally nice building should be built for the worship of the LORD God.

Through the prophet Nathan, God gently chides David with a reminder that it was not David's qualifications, but God's power that made him a mighty king. Nathan says, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth." This is not the only time that God had to put David in his place. David was a natural leader and was blessed by God, but he sometimes let his success go to his head.

Centuries later, the apostle Paul (who was himself an unlikely choice to be a leader in the church) wrote these wise words to the Christian community at Corinth: "Consider you own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth...so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29) Paul gives us a reminder that God specializes in doing the improbable through unexpected people in unlikely circumstances.

It is in this context that I invite you consider to story of Mary today. Don't get hung up on questions of angels and biology or how it is possible for God to take human form. Instead, ponder how this story is another example that God specializes in doing the improbable through unexpected people in unlikely circumstances. And then think about how you might be one of those unexpected people through whom God might do the improbable. For you see, the miracle of Christmas is not just that Christ was born of Mary. The miracle of Christmas is Emmanuel – God with us. Not God with us for thirty years two thousand years ago, but God with us today.

If I had to pick one stanza of one Christmas carol to be my favorite, it would be the final stanza of "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It is a prayer and goes like this,

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell.
Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.

Think of the image in that verse, that Christ might be born in us. Is that any less astounding than the news Gabriel gave to Mary? And like Mary, we might well protest, "How can this be?" I'm just an ordinary person, nothing special. How is it possible that Christ can be born in me?

And the answer for us is the same as it was for Mary and for Abraham and Sarah and for Moses and for Jeremiah. It's not us and our qualifications that make it possible. It's God that is at work in us, and with God, all things are possible.

Years ago I came across this brief prayer and I'd like to share it with you. It's one that we can pray quite often: "Dear Lord, are you absolutely sure about me? And if you are, will you please help me be sure about me? Amen."