Improbabilities and Promise

By Dr. Dave Neale

The history of Israel is defined by its countless improbabilities. The revelation of God is, in itself, the greatest improbability of the world of course. And that, as God has revealed himself in history through improbable events, the nature of God is revealed to us.

So let’s talk about the Improbabilities and Promise of the Mary story.

Would it surprise you to hear me say that one of the great improbabilities of the entire drama of Israel is based is the problem of infertility?

There are three pivotal women in biblical history who cannot bear children (perhaps because their husbands are infertile?): Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth.

We have the infertility of Sarah/Abraham, who bears Isaac very late in life (Abraham was 99!). The improbability is that no Isaac – no nation of Israel. Abraham is already working out of Plan B by having a son through Hagar. And yet, out of an aged barren womb springs a nation: Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them… So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen 15:5-6).

An immense promise based on an immense improbability.

Two other times in the history of the nation the promise dangled in the balance as older barren women became chosen by God to fulfill the plan for Israel.

Hannah in 1 Samuel is “advanced in age” and conceives and bears Samuel, the prophet who would institute the monarchy and Israel’s great halcyon days of glory through David and Solomon. Last week we talked about how Jesus is the branch from the root of Jesse, David’s father. Jesus is the “shoot of Jesse.” No Samuel, no Jesse, no David, no Jesus.

An immense promise based on an immense improbability.

As an aside, notice how Mary’s words intentionally echo those of Hannah 1000 years previously:

Hannah, mother of Samuel: My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God!

Mary, mother of Jesus: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour!

Our third heroine, Elizabeth, is also barren into her latter years. And yet, she becomes the mother of John the Baptist who goes before the Messiah to prepare the way of salvation. He was, Jesus said, Elijah revived.

Immense promises based on immense improbabilities.

Let’s turn to Mary, whose situation is contrasted with the great matriarchs in that she is a maiden, not old, and she is a virgin, not a barren wife. Now the improbability becomes an exponential one!

As we say in the Creed:

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

The social conventions for a teenage girl prior to marriage were very strict. Basically, until betrothed and moved to her husband’s household, a young woman was confined to her home. She did not go out alone, she certainly didn’t travel or speak to strangers, or men at all for that matter. This is the way the culture of the time dealt with the risk to family and clan of an unwanted pregnancy. It was a world as tightly controlled as the village could make it.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Mary is a girl at the lowest levels of village culture, and now one under suspicion of immorality. …for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant (Luke 1:47).

When her pregnancy became known, you can imagine people’s reaction when she claimed to have been visited by and angel who said of the baby:

“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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:27).

Very unusual is the fact that a maiden travelled 144 kilometers (apparently alone?) to visit her cousin Elizabeth.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-40).

By the way, the traditional village of Zechariah and Mary is Ein Karem not far from Jerusalem and described today as a “vibrant bohemian village of about 2000 people.” Known for its music and food scene.

Mary’s song loops all the way back to the idea of God’s promise to Abraham when she proclaims that through this manifestation in her own life, God has fulfilled this word:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:55).

Improbable doesn’t do the situation justice![[2]](#endnote-2)

From the Text

The application of this passage is not that we should rejoice in God in the way she did. We are nothing like Mary, this sweet child of God, this innocent maiden called from the foundation of the world to be the Mother of Christ.

We weren’t there when the river of God bubbles to the surface in a tiny village in the home of a lowly family of no regard. We weren’t there when Mary’s life was wrenched from the ordinary by the epiphanic event of history. We don’t sit, as she did, at the very crux of salvation history. We don’t live in the crucible of epiphany as did Mary. We have perfectly ordinary lives. In fact, we are called to live our lives in faith rather than in the exaltation of epiphany.

But there is something we share with Mary and that is the promises of God.

Think about the Promise of God to Israel as a long and winding subterranean river.

Think of the promise of God to:

* Abraham for a people as numerous as the stars,
* Moses who is promised a land of refuge,
* David that an heir would sit on his throne forever
* The promise at Pentecost that the gift of the Holy Spirit is “…for you, for your children…everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39).

The longest subterranean river in the world is in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico (the Sistema Sac Actun cave system). It travels for 153 km underground.



As Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, "Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea."

Speaking of immense improbabilities… What are the chances of a guy who is 69 years old learning to swim? So I’ve enrolled in Adult Beginner Swimming Lessons, otherwise known as Supervised Drowning. My goal week-by-week has been ingesting just a little less pool water than the week before. And I’m making very little progress! I am proud to report that I have just graduated from Level 1! That doesn’t really fit my message – but I’ve been dying to tell you the news!

Flowing underground for 300 years from Abraham to Moses, 500 years from Moses to David, and 1000 years from David to our story…

We are like Mary in that we share the river of the promises of God. Even though your river feels subterranean right now, the promises remain. Mary said:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:55).

Like Mary, we live as children of the same promises. It is no wonder Mary said, as The Message translates Luke 1:46: “I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.”

Hannah prayed, “I’m bursting with God-news! I’m walking on air. I’m laughing at my rivals. I’m dancing my salvation” (1 Samuel 2:1).

Join us now as we celebrate in dance, bursting with God-news!

Benediction: And now may you, like Hannah who is dancing her salvation, like Mary who is dancing the song of my Saviour God, do a pirouette in your kitchen or dance a little jig hallway to remind yourself that you too are a child of the Promise. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

1. Joseph was of the “House of David,” i.e. Judah, Luke 1:27. Mary’s lineage is unknown, although her cousin married Joseph, a Levite. As I said last week, Nazareth was a village of about 60 acres, most of it under cultivation, and a small population of 480 or so. Since a *Bet Av* would normally consist of 40- 60 souls, we could well imagine that there would have been maybe a dozen clans in the village. There was no such thing as anonymity – no such thing as a secret in a village that size. When two of these families undertake a marriage it is a significant matter for the village. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sidebar: The Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary asserts that Joseph was a widow who brought at least six children to the marriage (Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? Mark 6:3). But if you don’t hold that view, the case is simply that Joseph and Mary went on to have a sizable family after the birth of Jesus. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)