

# ALL IS POSSIBLE

## ADVENT



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Luke 1:26-38  
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*Luke 1:26-38*

Something awesome happened for U.S. runner Abbey D'Agostino: she qualified for the 5,000 meters in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Then something awful happened: more than halfway through her qualifying heat, D'Agostino became tangled with Nikki Hamblin of New Zealand, and both runners tumbled to the ground.

It may seem strange to be talking about the Summer Olympics at Christmastime, but D'Agostino's story relates very much to the story of Mary, who carried the Son of God in her womb, and to those of us who carry the Son of God in our hearts. Indeed, awesome and awful things will happen.

What do we do with that? What does Mary do with it?

### An angel visits

**Luke 1:26-27:**

**In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.**

Who is Gabriel? He is one of seven archangels who stand in the presence of God, and he is one of two archangels, along with Michael, whose names we know. In the book of Daniel, he interprets the so-called "last days" (Daniel 8:15-16, 9:21). He has already made an appearance in the Gospel of Luke, announcing to Zacharias that his barren wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son, who turned out to be John the Baptist. Gabriel's appearance, even before we know what he's doing, signals a major eschatological development.

A particular angel (Gabriel) is sent from God to a particular city (Nazareth) in a particular region (Galilee) to a particular virgin (Mary) who is betrothed to a particular man (Joseph) who is a descendant of

a particular man (David). Luke is very particular in his descriptions in order to leave no doubt that he is describing a real angel, real people, real places, and real events.

Nazareth was so insignificant a place that even a Galilean such as Nathaniel could dismiss it: "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Nevertheless, God sends an angel to the backwaters of Nazareth. Nothing is said to distinguish Mary in any way: she has no status in her world. Joseph, on the other hand, is said to be in the line of King David, from whom the Messiah, the ultimate Jewish king, was expected to come.

Betrothal, which means more than engagement in our culture, is legally binding to the extent that the man and the woman were already called husband and wife.

What does the angel want?

### Double portion of grace

**Luke 1:28-29:**

**And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.**

The words translated "greetings" and "favored" are both related to the word usually translated "grace." Gabriel extends a double portion of God's grace to Mary. God is favoring Mary in an extraordinary way. The additional greeting, "the Lord is with you," was often extended to an individual who was called to some great task that necessitates the Lord's empowerment.

The Lord told Moses, whom he called to deliver the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). The Lord told Joshua, whom he called to displace the occupants of Canaan, "...for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). An angel told Gideon, whom he called to mount a desperate military campaign, "The Lord is with you . . ." (Judges 6:12). And so on.

Mary knows her biblical history: her poem in Luke 1:46-55 pulls together multiple strands of the Hebrew Scriptures to create a masterpiece. On the one hand, Mary probably understands, in a general way, the “sort of greeting” that Gabriel extended her; on the other hand, she doesn’t know specifically what Gabriel wants with her. How could she know?!

In any event, though she is greatly troubled by the greeting, evidently because she doesn’t know what the greeting specifically means, she wants to know what it means: she tries to “discern what sort of greeting this might be.” She’s not running from the angel. She *wants* to hear Gabriel out. In this respect, she goes beyond both Moses and Gideon, who both pushed back when told that the Lord was with them.

### **Greetings, O favored one!**

What’s your name? God knows it. What city do you live in? What region? God knows where you live. Are you married? Single? Engaged? God knows your status. There isn’t a thing about you that he doesn’t know. Knowing everything about you, he comes to you in a particular way, in a particular place, and at a particular time—perhaps even now, as you’re reading this.

God favored Mary. Does he favor you? He favors everyone. “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). The apostle Paul begins all thirteen of his letters by bidding his readers “grace.” He doesn’t bid some of the people in the churches grace; he bids them all grace. To appreciate God’s favor, though, it helps to believe that you are worthy of no more favor than the next person. Those with no status in our world therefore have an advantage: it’s easier for them to receive God’s favor because they’re not receiving favor from the world.

When my first child was born, and the nurse put her in my arms, I was a goner. My wife and I wanted to have another child, but I was so taken with my new daughter that I wondered if I could ever feel the same way about another child. Three years later, my second daughter was born. They put her in my arms, and, whoa, I was a goner again! It’s not even possible for me to even think about favoring one over the other. I can’t even think in those terms. I favor them both. God favors each of us.

Greetings, O favored one! What sort of greeting is this? What does God want of you? Whatever it is, he wants you to know that he is with you. Whatever God wants you to do, no matter how impossible it seems, he

will make the doing of it possible. Do you want to know what it is? Mary wanted to know what God wanted of her: she “tried to discern.” Do you want to know what God wants of you? Do you want to hear God out?

### **The great task**

**Luke 1:30-33:**

**And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 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, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”**

If Mary is troubled and confused, the angel assures her that there’s nothing to fear and that the “favor” he’s extending to her comes from God himself. Okay, what’s the task?

She’s going to have a son. She’s going call the son Jesus. The child is not only going to be her son, he will also be God’s Son. She will not only “call” the son Jesus; he will also be “called” the Son of the Most High. As the Son of God, the Most High God, he will be king of Israel (Psalms 2:7, 89:27).

Her son will be “great” in that God will give him the throne of David, for he will be in the line of David, through Joseph. But he will not reign as David did, or as any of the kings of Israel did; he will reign over the house of Jacob—that is, Israel—“forever.” The Lord promised to establish the “kingdom” of a special king from the line of David “forever” (2 Samuel 7:8-16). The angel says Jesus is the one: “of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Luke makes the point in Acts 2:29-36 that the resurrected Jesus is sitting on the throne of David in heaven even now, where he reigns not only over Israel but also over the whole world. Of course, Jesus will consummate his reign, and usher in the new creation, upon his return (1 Corinthians 15:24).

How about it, Mary?

## Extraordinary faith

**Luke 1:34:**

**And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”**

What does Mary mean, “How will this be . . . ?”? She doesn’t question whether this will be; she wants to know *how* this will be.

The angel has told Mary she’s going to have a son. If a woman is told, even by an angel, that she’s going to have a child, and she believes what she’s been told, she would quite naturally believe that she would conceive in the usual way: with the help of a man. For Mary, a man stands at the ready: Joseph. True, she’s a virgin, but she doesn’t expect to be for much longer. Why then does Mary ask the angel, “How will this be . . . ?”?

Mary responds to Gabriel’s extraordinary greeting and extraordinary promise with extraordinary faith. She doesn’t believe this birth will come about in the ordinary way, even though Gabriel has not yet said that anything out of the ordinary will bring it about. This is a woman of extraordinary faith.

Yes, but back to Mary’s question: how will this be?

## The Son of God

**Luke 1:35-37:**

**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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.”**

The angel answers Mary’s extraordinary faith with an extraordinary answer. Indeed, she will not conceive in the usual way. A man will not “come upon” her; the Holy Spirit will come upon her. A man will not “overshadow” her; the power of the Most High will overshadow her. The Holy Spirit, who is the Most High God, the third person of the Trinity, will surround Mary with his glorious presence, just as the Lord surrounded the Israelites of old with his glorious presence (Exodus 40:34-35; Numbers 9:18, 10:34).

Of course, when the Lord surrounded Israel with his glorious presence, he didn’t impregnate anyone. He’s doing a new thing—an extraordinary new thing. He will create new life in a new way. He will bring about new creation in the womb of a woman in the old creation. Mary’s womb will become like Eden. As God placed the first Adam in Eden, he will place the second Adam in the virgin’s womb.

Because the son will be conceived by the *Holy Spirit*, he will be called “holy”—set apart for God in a special way. Earlier, the angel said the son would be called the Son of God because he would be the king of Israel. Now the angel gives another reason for calling him the Son of God: the Holy Spirit, God himself, will be the father.

The angel encourages Mary with news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. God has already done something extraordinary in the womb of a barren woman. Literally, the angel says that no “word” will be impossible with God. In other words, the angel says that God does what he says he will do, even if what he says he will do seems preposterous. God said a barren woman would become pregnant, and she became pregnant. God now says that a virgin will become pregnant. Can God do such a thing? Even if you believe that God can do such a thing, do you want him to do such a thing—and do such a thing to you?

Mary has much to lose. If she becomes pregnant apart from Joseph, what is Joseph going to think? She risks losing her husband. She risks losing her reputation. She risks losing her dreams. And if Mary gives birth to the promised Son, what will come of him? Later, an old man will tell her that “a sword will pierce through your own soul” (Luke 2:35). Something awful will happen. Mary, if the Spirit conceives within her, will take on the labor pains of the new creation.

## What are you afraid of?

What does God want of you? He doesn’t want you to do what Mary did: he doesn’t want you to carry the Son of God in your womb. No, he wants you to carry the Son of God in your heart. God wants his Son not only to reign over the world, he also wants his Son to reign in you. One of the ways he reigns over the world, by the way, is by reigning in you, for he not only wants to reign in you, he also wants to reign through you. The Son of God, as king, dwells in the hearts of those who believe in him not simply to make his home there, but also to sit on a throne there (Romans 8:10, Galatians 4:6, Ephesians 3:14-19, Colossians 1:27). Before the advent

of Christ, God reigned in and from the Holy of Holies in the temple. Now the throne room is the hearts of God's people.

Do you want the Son of God to reign in you? Or do you want him to leave you alone?

If you want God to leave you alone, why do you want him to do so? Is it because you're afraid that if you let his Son reign in you, his Son will want more of you than you want to give? Are you afraid of feeling out of control? Are you afraid of what you might lose? Are you afraid of losing your prospects, losing your reputation, or losing your dreams? Nothing will be impossible with God: is that awesome news or awful news? Nothing will be impossible? Think about the possibilities!

When I first visited Europe, I spent a week in Germany with a friend who was working there; then we drove together to spend two weeks in Italy. Driving in Germany was different from driving in Italy. German drivers seemed to prefer order. Italian drivers seemed to prefer disorder. I made this observation to an Italian man whom I met. He told me, "In Italy, all is possible." All is possible: is that awesome news or awful news? For my friend and me, it turned out to be both awesome news and awful news, but that's another story!

If you let Christ reign in you, then you will inevitably stand out as a challenge to the kingdoms of this world, which don't take kindly to being challenged. If you don't go with the flow, the flow will push against you. To carry the Son of God in your womb—or in your heart—is to court disaster. If you let the Son of God reign in your heart, a sword will pierce your soul.

## **Do not be afraid**

Then again, the angel says, "Do not be afraid . . ." Why not? Because "you have found favor with God." God favors you. How do you know? He sent his Son into the world as an embryo so that he could be born, grow up, and die on a cross for you. If God did that for you, how could he *not* favor you? If the Son of God did that for you, what sinister purposes could he have for reigning in you?

Sure, if you let the Son of God reign in your heart, a sword will pierce your soul. But look into your heart, where Jesus wants to reign. Don't you believe that you were created for some purpose, even if you can't define it? Don't you hope to do something great, something

that lasts, something that transcends the confines of this little life, even if you don't know what it is, and even if you may have to redefine greatness? Don't you want to suffer for something that's worth suffering for?

God can do an extraordinary new thing. He is doing an extraordinary new thing. He is giving birth not to his Son (he's already done that, of course); he's giving birth to a new creation. Do you want to share in those labor pains? Do you want to be part of that joy? Do you want to take that great adventure? And by the way, the Lord is with you. He makes possible the impossible.

Awesome things will happen. Awful things will happen. Do not be afraid.

How about it, Mary?

## **The servant of the Lord**

**Luke 1:38:**

**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.**

When the angel encouraged Mary with news of Elizabeth's pregnancy and the profession that God does what he promises, he did so by beginning with the word "behold." Mary begins her answer with the same word.

Literally, Mary says, "Behold, the servant of the Lord." On the one hand, her self-description conveys humility: she sees herself as a servant, or a slave. On the other hand, she professes to serve a different kind of master: the Lord himself. And if that means being impregnated by the Spirit of God and exposing herself to all manner of loss and shame, so be it.

If no "word" will be impossible with God, Mary says "let it be to me according to your word." The servant of the Lord makes herself available to the Lord, who makes possible the impossible. Mary opens herself up to a soul-piercing, creation-shaking odyssey.

## **Let the Son of God reign in your heart**

Who are you? Behold, the servant of the Lord. If being the servant of the Lord means giving all of yourself to him and opening yourself up to whatever that means, so be it. This is an exchange of gifts, isn't it? God gives his Son to us, and we give ourselves to him.

Let him in. Let the Son of God reign in your heart this Christmas. Use Mary's words. Say to God, "Behold, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word," even if you don't know what that word is or what it means yet. He'll make use of you. Open yourself to this soul-piercing, creation-shaking odyssey.

Christ is born: all is possible. Christ is risen: all is possible. Christ is coming: all is possible.

## The rest of the story

After Abbey D'Agostino tumbled to the track in Rio de Janeiro, instead of picking herself up and continuing, she stopped to help Nikki Hamblin, the New Zealand runner she collided with. She encouraged her competitor, whom she had never met, "Get up, we have to finish this." Both runners finished the race, though D'Agostino had injured her knee in the fall and limped for the last five laps. At the finish line, D'Agostino embraced Hamblin, then left the stadium in a wheelchair. Neither runner qualified for the finals, but both were invited to compete nonetheless based on the sportsmanship that they showed. D'Agostino, however, had to decline because of her injury, which would require surgery.

Now for the rest of the story—or, should I say, the back story. Growing up, and into her early twenties, D'Agostino was a driven perfectionist, both in the classroom and on the track, but she felt burdened by expectations and she struggled with injuries. She suffered from anxiety and panic attacks. She felt lonely.

The injuries, D'Agostino said, "exposed what's in my heart." She said, "I had to make this decision: what was I running for?" She called releasing expectations before a big race "a profound spiritual moment." In the end, the injuries led her to "depend on God in a way that I've never been open to before." Of the injuries, she said, "I would not have been able to learn any of the lessons and I would never have reached such a familiarity and understanding of Christ without the way that it's happened."

D'Agostino added: "Christian faith has always been a part of my life, but it kind of made this transition from something that was in my head, and something that I believed in my head, to something that I could really feel in my heart, and I felt like I didn't want to run for other people any more. I wanted to run for something that was secure, and that was God. Something so much greater than me and something I can't control."

Sounds to me as if she let Christ reign in her heart.

Going into the Olympics, D'Agostino said, she was determined to put Christ first. "That doesn't manifest in medals all the time," she said. "Sometimes it does, but it doesn't always. Sometimes it means coming in last place."

After the race in which she stopped to help her competitor, D'Agostino said, "Although my actions were instinctual at that moment, the only way I can and have rationalized it is that God prepared my heart to respond that way. This whole time here, He's made clear to me that my experience in Rio was going to be about more than my race performance—and as soon as Nikki got up I knew that was it."

D'Agostino was asked once what was the one thing she would want people to know about her. Her answer? "I love Jesus." (You can see a video montage of D'Agostino's Olympic race here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCVIRFWOjgE>.)

Offer yourself to Christ this Christmas. Do not be afraid.