

CHRISTMAS AND THE GOD WHO IS ABLE **(Luke 1:26-38, 49)**

Years ago, when I was pastoring in Stillwater, every Sunday morning, I would lead a children's sermon, in the morning worship service. I would sit on the steps to the stage, and the children would gather around me. I think the adults got more out of the children's sermon than they did the longer sermon I preached later in the service.

In one children's sermon, I asked, "What can you do now that you couldn't do when you were younger?" I don't remember the answers I got that day. I imagine it was something along the lines of, "Tie my shoes," or "Ride bicycle," or something like that.

This morning, I want to ask the adults a different question. My question for you is, "What can you not do now that you used to be able to do?" Think about that for a moment. You could list more, but let me suggest a few.

- Some of you used to be able to read without the use of reading glasses or bifocals.
- Some of you used to play sports and not have to worry about being so sore you couldn't get out of bed the next morning.
- Some of you used to never have to watch what you ate, and now you can't help but see what you done ate.
- Some of you never used to never have to write down a phone number, an address, or an important date, and now you can't remember where you put the notes you have written to yourself.
- I used to be able to sit in a recliner and watch the evening news without going to sleep, but I can't do that anymore, and I'm not talking about the 10:00 news but the 5:00.

Whether we like it or not, our abilities change as we get older. Sometimes we deny that is the case. We think of ourselves as younger than we really are.

When he was 56, Tony Campolo lamented to his wife one day, "Well, I guess I'm middle-aged." She answered, "Oh, really. How many 112-year-olds do you know?"

- You know you're getting older when temptation whispers, "Why not? Why not?" and your body answers, "Why bother? Why bother?"
- You know you're getting older when your narrow waist and your broad mind has changed places.
- You know you are getting older when you avoid going places where you know the people will outnumber the comfortable chairs.

From birth to death there is a continual change and fluctuation in what we can do. At birth we can hardly do anything, but as we grow physically and mentally, our ability to manipulate objects, understand concepts, and a myriad of other things increase.

Likewise, when we pass from young adulthood to middle age and then on into our senior years, while there will be a lessening of some skills, it is still possible to grow in wisdom. Many seniors I know are far more likely than those who are younger to see the

potential danger of one course of action and the wisdom of another.

While part of being human is experiencing the continual growth and decline of certain abilities, what it means to be God is exactly the opposite. Because God is God, He never grows nor does He ever decline in His abilities. Just as there is nothing that God can do now that He used to not be able to do, there is nothing that God cannot do now that He used to be able to do.

There are three words that are often used to describe God: **omnipresent**, **omniscient**, and **omnipotent** . . . I want to add one more—**omnicompetent**. God is able to do all things and do them all well. We are going to look at a text today that teaches that very truth. Our text is Luke 1:26-38. This text teaches us about the God who is able. Let's read our text.

The key verse is v. 37. This is going to get a little technical, so stay with me. In the Greek language, there is a word that is variously translated as *power*, *can*, and most often, *able*. Luke takes that word and adds the Greek letter *alpha* to it. That corresponds to our English letter "a."

By adding the little letter "a" on the front of a word, you can make it the opposite. For example, if you add *a* to the word *political*, you get *apolitical*, which means *not political*; or add *a* to *typical*, and you get *atypical*, which means, *not typical*. When you add *a* to the Greek word for the word *able*, you get *not able*. For something to be not able, that means it is impossible; so, when Gabriel declared that nothing was impossible for God, he was saying that God is able to do all things.

Christmas teaches, "God is able." Gabriel told Mary that if God was able to give Elizabeth a child in her old age, God would be able to give Mary a baby even though she had never been with a man. The Christmas story teaches that if God is able to cause His eternal Son to be born of a virgin teenager, He is able to do all things for us and through us.

That is essentially what Mary said in her song of praise that follows our text. Look at v. 49. When Mary exalted God *as the Mighty One*, she used the Greek word which means *powerful*, *able*. God is the powerful One, the able One. He is the One who is able to do all things.

If we were to take the time, I could read to you verse after verse in the NT that uses the Greek word for *able* in connection with what God is able to do.

- Romans 4:21—God is able to fulfill what He promises.
- Romans 16:25—God is able to ground us firmly in our faith.
- Ephesians 3:20—God is able to exceed our highest expectations.
- 2 Timothy 1:12—God is able to safeguard what we deposit.
- Hebrews 2:18—God is able to strengthen us when we are tempted.
- Hebrews 7:25—God is able to grant us complete salvation.
- Jude 24—God is able to bring us safely to Himself.

You and I serve a God who is able. From our passage, I want to stress three truths about the God who is able.

The God Who Is Able Dispels Our Doubt

Mary may have been young, but she knew enough about biology to know that she didn't qualify to be a prospective mother. Don't you think there must have been some doubt in Mary's mind when an angel told her that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah, the Christ who had been promised in the OT? Surely, she would have thought, "Why would God choose me?" We know she asked basically, "How could God use me" (v. 34)?

I think those same two questions plague us when we are told or when we contemplate the prospect that God wishes to use us. When we are acutely aware that God is able, those two doubts are dispelled. Let's look at little more closely at those doubts and how the God who is able dispels them.

1. God Dispels Our Doubt That He Wants to Use Us.

Many Christians cannot possibly imagine that God really wants to use them. They think to themselves, "What do I have to offer?" I am here to tell you that He most certainly does want to use you.

Consider this for moment: Just about every thing God has done, is doing, and will do, He has done, is doing, and will do through other. God is the supreme delegator. That even includes creation. You might think that God the Father created the universe on His own, but Scripture teaches that God the Father used God the Son as the agent of creation. We are told in John 1:3, "Through Him [Jesus] all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made." Colossians 1:15 says quite simply of Christ, "For by Him all things were created."

God created Adam and Eve, but instead of creating a bunch of other people, He told them to be fruitful and increase. God created the world and placed Adam Eve in the Garden of Eden, but He told them to take care of it. God created the family. He expects husbands and wives to take care of one another, and He expects moms and dads to take care of their children. God created the church, and He expects the people of the church to teach, to encourage, to comfort, to build up, to witness, to participate with Him in getting the good news of Christ out to the world. God works through others, and He wants to work through you.

Years ago, Frederick Buechner wrote a little book in which he described the encounter of Gabriel and Mary. In his description he wrote, "She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who He was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath his great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl."

God uses His word to rid us of doubt and strengthen our faith. "Faith comes by

hearing and hearing by the word of God.” When you know God has spoken to you, you are able to move forward in faith.

You, too, may be frightened to believe that God wants to use you, but I assure you, He does. Not only does God dispel our doubt that He wants to use us, but also . . .

2. God Dispels Our Doubt That He Can Use Us.

God wants to use you, but more importantly, He can use you. You don’t have to be a biblical scholar; you don’t have to have a theological degree. God can take you as you are and make you into what He wants you to be.

I once read about a grandmother who vacationed with her grandson in the Rocky Mountains. At one point they just stopped to admire the grandeur of the Rockies. After a few minutes of thoughtful silence her grandson remarked, “Just think—God did all this with only one hand!”

The grandmother puzzled over that comment until she asked him what he meant.

He answered, “Oh, you know, Grandmother. The Bible says Jesus was sitting on the right hand of God.”

Even with Jesus sitting on God’s right hand, God can still use you. If God can use a teenage peasant girl to give birth to the Lord of Glory, He can use you.

Do you find yourself imprisoned by doubt from time to time? You wonder, “What contribution can I make; what difference can I have in this world.” With God living in you there is no limit to what He can do for you and through you.

Years ago, Henry Blackaby produced a study entitled, *Experiencing God*. He said that if you think God can’t use you, that says more about what you believe about God than what you believe about yourself. The problem is not false humility. The problem is bad theology. When you serve a big God, you know He can use you because it is He who will be working through you.

The God who is able dispels our doubt.

The God Who Is Able Deserves Our Trust

After Gabriel informed Mary of God’s plans and of His ability to bring about those plans, look at how Mary responded (v.38). Mary didn’t fully understand God, but she believed Him. Mary firmly, clearly, and verbally said “yes” to the Lord. She indicated her willingness and eagerness to cooperate with God’s plan. At this point, Mary teaches us two things.

1. We Trust God by Accepting Our Role as a Servant.

Mary realized and declared, “I am the Lord’s servant.”

I believe there are few things more important for us to understand that the fact that **we are God’s servants; He is not ours**. When I hear some people pray, it seems to me they are telling God what to do instead of seeking to know what He wants them to do.

I like what Corrie Ten Boom once said. She advised, “Don’t bother to give God

instructions; just report for duty.”

That is what Mary did, and that is what we need to do—report for duty. When we say, “I accept my role as a servant,” we will report for duty.

It has been said there are two ways to begin the day. You can say, “Good morning, Lord” or you can say, “Good Lord, it’s morning.” Let me suggest that every day you wake up, you should begin the morning by saying, “Here am I Lord. Use me as You wish today. I am at Your disposal.

Mary teaches us to trust God by accepting our role as a servant, and she teaches us something else, as well.

2. We Trust God by Not Accepting Responsibility for Success.

Take note of what Mary did not say. Mary did not say, “I am the Lord’s servant; I will make this happen.” No. She said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” She didn’t make herself responsible for the success of God’s plan. She just made herself available for God to use as He saw fit. It was left up to Him to bring about what He planned.

God doesn’t expect you to shoulder the responsibility for the success of His plans. Our job is simply to do what God says not to make sure that everything goes as we think they are to go.

It is not your job to get people to believe the gospel; it is your job and privilege to share the gospel. It is not your job to change people’s lives; it is your job to love people with the transforming love of Christ.

I have come to believe that it is not my job to grow this church; it is my job to pastor this church. Jesus said, “I will build My church.” I am going to hold Him to that promise, not myself.

It is a freeing thing to know what you are not expected to do. God is not glorified when you work yourself to death to make something happen. He is glorified when you trust Him to do what He has promised.

Are you trusting God, or are you trying to do things on your own? Don’t wear yourself out to make things happen. Let God be God in your life. Let Him heal your hurts. Let Him guide your career. Let Him determine your path. Let God be God.

The God we serve is the God who is able. The God who is able dispels our doubt. He deserves our trust.

The God Who Is Able Demands Our All

God doesn’t want a little bit of loyalty or a modicum of commitment. God is not looking for a measure of allegiance or a dab of faithfulness. God wants you, as they say, “Lock, stock, and barrel.” He wants your total self—body, soul, and spirit. And He wants your total devotion to Him.

That is what He wanted from Mary. For Mary, God was more important to her than her reputation. It was common knowledge that Mary was expecting before she and

Joseph got married, and it was suspected that Joseph wasn't the father. You can be sure that tongues were wagging and heads were shaking their disapproval.

God was more important to Mary than following her own plans and dreams.

God must become more important to us than what the world has to offer. That will be the case when we truly love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Don't hold back. Give yourself fully to God.

The year was 1947. The woman's name was Eleanor. She was 23, the mother of a one-year-old child, and Eleanor was dying of tuberculosis. Two days before Christmas, she was in the hospital and no one was sure if she was going to make it to see Christmas.

Some time before her doctor had promised her that she could spend Christmas Eve with her family at home. He only made that promise because he was sure she would be dead by then. She wasn't, and now she asked the doctor to make good on his promise. The next day, Christmas Eve, against his better judgment, the doctor allowed her to go home. She was told she couldn't hold her child, and she would have to wear a surgical mask whenever she talked with anyone except her husband. He had contracted TB in the war, and now he was immune.

Eleanor had a rare form of tuberculosis. She had a tubercular cavity in the lower lobe of one lung, which was very uncommon. Back 70 years ago there were no drugs to cure TB such as we have today. The doctors did everything they could to shut the cavity and cause it to grow back together, but none of their procedures worked. Now, it was just a matter of time. Eleanor was grateful to have some time with her family during Christmas.

Late Christmas Day, Eleanor returned to the hospital. Her condition continued to worsen, but amazingly, Eleanor held on, clinging to life.

By the end of February, Eleanor weighed less than 80 pounds, and she had developed complications. Even though she was unable to eat, she became nauseous.

The doctor thought it was out of the question, but since he couldn't account for her nausea, he gave her a pregnancy test. To his astonishment, it came back positive. The doctor wanted to perform an abortion, but he didn't think she would live through the procedure. He figured her body was so far gone it would not support the fetus anyway.

Eleanor was fed intravenously, and the medical staff watched as she fought to sustain her life and the one growing inside her. By late March of 1948 she began to show signs of improvement. Her temperature went down. She began to eat solid food and gain weight. An x-ray showed that her TB cavity had quit growing. A subsequent x-ray revealed that her diaphragm was pushing up against the lower lobe of her diseased lung so as to make room for the baby. The baby was causing the two sides of her cavity to come together. Before the baby finally arrived, the cavity finally closed and grew together. Instead of endangering her life even further, her baby saved her life.

She continued to send Christmas cards to her doctor for years afterwards.

Isn't that what the story of Christmas is all about? Christmas is about a baby who brought life to a diseased and dying world. Christmas is about a God who is able to do the impossible.

What do you need God to do for you? What does God want to do through you? Dare to believe in the God who is able!