

Insurance companies use that phrase a lot, “act of God.” Their definition of an act of God is an event that is completely beyond human control. They are, of course, referring to a natural disaster that is not predictable and not preventable. No one can predict where the next big tornado is going to touch down in Iowa. No one can say when the next big quake is going to rattle California. No one can predict when the next category 5 hurricane will hit Florida. Nor can anyone prevent those things from happening. In legalese they're called “acts of God.”

Ask a person who has survived one of those acts of God, and he or she might tell you, “That was the day my life changed forever.” Acts of God do that, change people’s lives forever. Mary had a day like that, when her life changed forever. No, Galilee was not struck by a hurricane. Nazareth was not devastated by a tornado. Her family’s home did not collapse in an earthquake. Yet what happened to her was earthshaking, and it did change her life forever. It changed our lives forever as well. And that’s what it took to do that -- an act of God!

You know, when a natural disaster occurs, you often learn the names of towns that you never heard of before, insignificant, out-of-the way places. This act of God occurred in a place just like that, in a town that the world would never have paid any attention to otherwise. Galilee was an insignificant backwater of the Roman Empire; Nazareth was an insignificant town.

And it happened to an insignificant person. No one would ever have heard of this particular Mary if it had not happened. She was just a young Jewish woman among many, living there with her parents. She was, we know, looking forward to the future. Legally betrothed to a man named Joseph, she was planning for the day when they’d begin living in their own home as husband and wife. Then her life changed forever. God sent Gabriel, a special messenger with a very special message. His greeting told Mary that she was on the receiving end of kindness from God himself!

Gabriel also immediately assured her that the Lord was with her. Oh, she was going to need that reassurance when she heard what he was about to tell her. She was very troubled by this -- not surprisingly! This odd greeting puzzled her. She was wondering, “What in the world is this all about?” Gabriel got straight to the point: “Do not fear, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” The word for “favor” is also the word for “grace.” It always points to a gift, a blessing that comes from God, unearned and unasked by the one who receives it. Mary was the recipient of a very special unearned and unasked-for grace. God had chosen her, from among all the women on earth, to bear his Son. “You will become pregnant,” Gabriel told her, “and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Seems to me that at that point, Mary could have been thinking that this is not all that unusual. A lot of young women have baby boys, and she was, after all, going to be living with her husband before long. And among the Jews, “Jesus” -- the Old Testament name “Joshua” -- was pretty common.

However, there was nothing usual at all about this. He went on, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.” The “Most High” is God in his omnipotence, the almighty Ruler of all things. This will be no usual conception, no ordinary birth; this will be no ordinary child! There's more: “the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.” In our first Lesson today we heard the promise God made to King David, that one of his

descendants would rule an everlasting kingdom. So indeed, no ordinary son for Mary, but the Son of God. No ordinary King and no ordinary kingdom.

And this kingdom will be hidden to the eyes of many. Sometimes, during Jesus' life, you could see that he was a king. He would heal people, raise people from the dead. But our God is a God who hides his glory. He hid his glory in the Virgin Mary – no one would have ever guessed that she was carrying the King of Kings who would reign forever. On Christmas Eve, God hid his glory in a feeding trough. There Christ lay, the commander and chief of the army of angels. And years later, God hid his glory on a cross. No one would have ever guessed that the man hanging on the middle cross was the Son of the Most High, the One who would reign over the house of Jacob forever. God hides his glory there, as Jesus bears the sins of the world and damns himself in order to save your soul.

God still hides his glory today. We want to see grandstand performances from God. We want him to wow us in a way that we can see. We want something to point to, something to look at, something that impresses us and excites us. But our God is a God who hides his glory today. And yet, he does tell us where we can find him. He tells you that you can find him in only one place, and that is the humble place of His Word

But we have doubts. When God's messengers -- not angels but the writers of his Word -- tell us things that are, humanly speaking, impossible, things that to human reason are unbelievable and unacceptable, we struggle. That God created the universe out of nothing in six days... That a great flood destroyed all but eight people... That the walls of Jericho fell without a shot being fired... That a crucified dead man came back to life, not revived after 3 minutes but resurrected after 36 hours... That's when our puny human reason resists. "Can this be literally, factually true?" we think. "Can anyone prove this to me?" Or when God's messengers tell us what he expects of us and how he wants to use us, then, too, we take a step backwards. He tells us that he wants to use our hands to help those who need help. He wants to use our talents and spiritual gifts to bring his blessings to others. Wants to use our mouths to tell people about him. Wants to use our time and our money for his priorities and his eternal purposes. We'll respond, "Well, I appreciate the thought, but no thanks. I have plenty of other uses for those things. Besides, what you're asking is too hard for me anyhow; you might want to find somebody else to do it."

And when God makes great big promises to us? That he will always provide everything we need... That he will always make all things work for our good... That he will always preserve and protect us in all our ways... That he will finally take us from this sin-cursed world to his glory-home to live there forever with him... Well, he promises great big things, but from one day to the next, we doubt and we worry and we are afraid. All this is just more evidence of how much we needed a Savior, how much we need Mary's Son and what he did for us. Our stubborn resistance to God's truth, our unwillingness to serve God, our slowness to trust him - - it's all just continuing proof of our inborn sinfulness. But this is why God acted . . . and it took an act of God!

There in Nazareth, in Mary, we see no disbelief, no reluctance, no fear. Practical girl, she

just had one question: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” She had never, to use the modern expression, “been with” a man, not even her betrothed, Joseph. Naturally, she wanted to have more information about how this would take place.

Gabriel obliged: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” In other words, an act of God! God the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High will make it happen, that this virgin conceives and bears a son. Explain it further? You might as well try to explain creation or the flood or the walls of Jericho or Christ’s resurrection. This would be an act of God’s mighty power, with a single purpose -- to keep his age-old promise and give the world his own Son. “Therefore,” the angel said, “the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” Jesus was the holy one, the only holy one ever born of a woman, born to redeem all the unholy ones born of women. He would live his entire holy life doing all that God demands from us. He, still the holy one, would then die under the law’s penalty, suffering all that God’s law condemns us to suffer for our sins. And yes, he would rise from death in living proof that he had succeeded. For this great saving act of God he was born.

It's obvious that Mary believed the angel's words. But in order to feed her faith even more, Gabriel announced another act of God. Her relative Elizabeth -- old, barren Elizabeth -- was six months along in her miraculous pregnancy. And that led to his last words, and it is the last word on the subject: “For nothing is impossible with God.” Mary answered all this with her words that have long been famous, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

It Took an Act of God. It took an act of God to provide a Savior for sinners, his Son, born of a virgin, born to save the world. The entire saving act of God, from Jesus’ conception to his resurrection, forever changed everything for sinners ... for you and me. Reconciled to God, sins forgiven, we now live in the King’s kingdom. Our Lord Jesus graciously reigns in our hearts with his love, in his kingdom that will never end.

It is true that life is getting scarier. Morality continues to decay. The body continues to get older. World peace, personal peace – it comes and goes. Nothing lasts forever. Except what we have hidden here, in the Word. Your sins are forgiven, forever. You are a child of God, forever. Jesus has been given the throne of David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end. Because of Christ, you do have a reason to be excited, a reason to be a person full of joy and hope.

And when our gracious God tells us the great and "impossible" things he has done, we believe that he did them. When he tells us how he wants to use us, our bodies and all we have, we say, “I am the Lord’s servant.” When he gives us great big promises, we trust that he will make them happen. After all, all it takes is an act of God. And for him, nothing is impossible! Amen.