



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Family. When I say that word, what comes to mind? Anyone think about Norman Rockwell and his famous paintings in the Saturday Evening Post?

One of Rockwell's most iconic Post paintings shows a father of a family at the head of the dinner table carving the roast. The mother is wearing her unsoiled apron, beaming over the meal in matronly elegance. The children gather dutifully around the table; obedient-looking and rosy-cheeked. Rockwell's message to the viewers was This family's life is absolutely perfect!

My guess it that not many of us here would vision that scene when thinking about family. If you are like me, you think about your kids and your grandchildren. You remember the last time you were together with them and you possibly remember the Christmas's past.

As a child, I remember family to be mom slaving in the kitchen, dad watching football on the couch and Gail and I laughing at the name Beatrice. I recall how I fought with my sister, how mom and dad argued often and the negative feeling that were conjured up when we had to go to grandmas house for dinner.

But family according to Norman Rockwell has no hassles, no headaches and is never in hot water. But a real family faces painful and perplexing predicaments. Loved ones die. Children make bad decisions. Parents get

divorced. There is never enough money. And who is going to the nursing home this week to visit grandma?

I bet Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus because she appears in the Bible. . . . had a Norman Rockwell family, right? Wrong. Dead wrong.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary? We just heard that read a few minutes ago. But earlier in Luke chapter 1, the angel Gabriel speaks to Zechariah in the Holy Place, only a few steps away from the Holy of Holies and the very presence of almighty God.

Now Gabriel travels to see Mary, far away from the temple in Jerusalem. Mary lives in Nazareth in Galilee, an insignificant town. Remember what Nathanael said? "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" John 1:46. The divinely chosen Zechariah responds to Gabriel with doubt and hesitation. "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years". Luke 1:18. How will Mary respond to Gabriel? Unlike Zechariah, the qualified and credentialed priest, Mary has no such religious training or status. What will Mary do when confronted by Gabriel, who promises that nothing is impossible with our God?

"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus". To accent the impossible, Luke accents Mary's virginity three times. Virgin specifies Mary as a young girl of marriageable age, about thirteen years old. Virgin also describes Mary in the more narrow sexual sense.

"Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel answered her that the Holy Spirit would come to her with the power of the most High. If Mary's pregnancy isn't impossible enough, the explanation is even more impossible! Through the Holy Spirit, really? Come on!

Can you imagine thirteen-year-old Mary going to her twenty something fiancé Joseph? Joseph starts talking about floor plans and things he would build and

Mary interrupts, "Joseph, sit down. We need to talk. Joseph, honey, I'm pregnant." So long Normal Rockwell. Houston, we have a problem!

What are our options when family life becomes family strife? When everything looks impossible? Close the door. That is our first option when trouble knocks on our door.

When Gabriel appears in Nazareth, Mary and Joseph are engaged. There is a huge difference between our modern rules of engagement and first-century Jewish rules of engagement. Though only engaged, according to Matthew 1:19, Joseph was Mary's husband. The same verse used the word divorce to describe ending the couple's engagement. Though they were not yet married, Joseph and Mary were in a binding contract that only death and divorce could terminate.

Upon hearing that Mary is pregnant, Joseph plans to divorce her. After all, Joseph was not that gullible. It is clear to Joseph that Mary was not the woman he thought she was. Mary was carrying another man's child. Joseph does not want to talk about it or work through it. What does Joseph do? Initially, his plan is to close the door.

When family conflict comes our way, we also sometimes close the door. Let's say a neat-freak wife needs a certain amount of law and order in her home, but her carefree husband doesn't get it. His wife says, "Look at this mess! Nobody ever picks up anything around here!" The husband responds, "You need more energy! Are you still taking those vitamins we spent good money on? This couple exchanges clichés and facts, but they don't directly address the problem. They close the door.

I remember a time at our dinner table when Frank was probably around 5 or 6 and I was complaining about how tough my day was that it was impossible to keep up with everything a young mom had to do. Dear little Frankie spoke up and said, "Mommy if you weren't so slow, maybe you could get everything done." Needless to say laughter followed my tears. Later on I remember Rodney trying to explain to Frank why he should never say anything like that to a woman again, even his mommy. The discussion was wasted on a child, but glad Rodney knew what not to say. We continue to laugh about that dinner even today.

When mission impossible shows up in families another option is to slam the door. We drop verbal bonds, like dear Frank. We rant and rave. We have

tempers and we throw tantrums. We fight like cats and dogs or the Hatfield's and the McCoy's. Discussion is over. Defensive lines are drawn. It is "in your face", "no way Jose" and "it ain't gonna happen" Slam the door.

Another way of handling family hurt is to lock the door and totally withdraw. "This is so broken and I'm so done!" This issue is so sensitive, so intense and so explosive, that we lock the door and throw away the key. Is there a better way?

Yes, there is. Open the door. But to open the door we need help, God's help. Gabriel tells Mary, "Nothing is impossible with our God." Empowered by this promise, Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." WOW

Martin Luther teaches us to say, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." Using our own reason, I close doors. I slam doors. I lock doors. Luther continues, "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel". God gives the Spirit through his word, this Word. "Nothing is impossible with our God."

It all finally looked absolutely impossible. Judas Iscariot betrayed him. Christ's disciples abandoned him. Peter denied him. The Jews disowned him. Pilate sentenced him. Herod mocked him. Soldiers scourged him and then they crucified him.

Luke writes in Acts, 2:24, "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. What looked like it was completely impossible, God made possible by raising Jesus from the dead.

No wonder Gabriel promised Mary, "Jesus 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."

God delivers his word to us so we look at our spouses and children and do what. Open the door.

In the last book in The Chronicles of Narnia, titled The Last Battle, C.S. Lewis describes his characters facing the mother of all battles. Then they come to a door. Some claimed that behind the door was a life-threatening monster.

However, once through the door and I quote: “They stood on green grass, the deep blue sky overhead, and the air blew gently on their faces like that of a day in early summer.”

They continued to go further and further in making wonderful discoveries. So what is the point here?

Open your foreboding door. Just like Mary, open your heart, open your ears and open you life to God’s Word. Sometimes the family situations aren’t as threatening as they look. And the COVID -19 situation might be coming to an end with a vaccine on the horizon. And just maybe our Christmas can be a time of rejoicing that the one we are left to ponder this morning brings such joy to our hearts, that we feel safe in opening many of our doors. In fact, when we open the door, maybe not at first, but soon enough we might find ourselves standing joyously in the abundant life God has prepared for each one of us. So ponder, like Mary, what the angels said, that you have found favor with God, because nothing is impossible with God. **AMEN**