

Luke 1:26-38
THE GOD WHO MAKES THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE
Dr. Douglas L. Rutt, ©2009

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be? . . . And the angel answered her, . . . "Nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

It seems like around this time every year there's a lot of talk in the news about the fact that certain retail chains have instructed their employees that they shouldn't greet customers with "Merry Christmas," but rather with something less specific, something more generic, something that will not offend anyone, something like "Seasons Greetings" or "Happy Holidays." In fact, one prominent family organization has analyzed more than 65 retail chains, and has categorized them as "companies for Christmas," "companies marginalizing Christmas," and "companies against Christmas."

I certainly have no big problem with how a retailer wants to greet me at the door—because I think we're in big trouble if we are going to rely on Walmart or Macys or Barnes and Noble, or any other commercial enterprise, to define what this season means for us—at the same time, I guess we would have to admit that amidst all the stress of the craziness and activity, and the advertising and the shopping and decorating and preparations, it certainly is easy to forget, or to lose sight of, the real significance of what we are preparing for in this season of Advent, isn't it?

That is why it is so important that we hear the beautiful text that we have before us today from the first chapter of Saint Luke. It is only fitting and proper that we take pause this afternoon, in this sanctuary, to wonder at the mystery and the beauty and simplicity of what the birth of our Lord Jesus means. For it is the greatest mystery and miracle of all time, the greatest miracle in the history of the world. And yet it starts out so quietly, so unpretentiously, so modestly, with a young, humble girl, probably about 15 or 16 years old, with nothing particularly special about her that would call attention to her, who comes from what is probably about the most insignificant backwater village of her time, and yet God sends the Angel Gabriel to her. And in this story of humble beginnings, of the Angel's announcement to the Virgin Mary, we see how

GOD MAKES POSSIBLE, THE IMPOSSIBLE

I would suppose that for many people, this account is so fascinating because it is a touching story of the birth of a child. The manger scenes that this season calls to mind, the drama of Joseph and Mary who had to go from place to place in search of lodging, so that Mary could give birth to her child. The baby, finally, born in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, with the animals lowing around him. The angels appearing before the shepherds, the wise men from the east guided by a star, there is so much beauty and drama to the whole story!

But the real beauty and drama of the Christmas story, and the real significance of what we see happening in the reading from Saint Luke, chapter one, is not merely about the circumstances of the birth of a baby, but it has to do with just who this Son to be born of Mary is, for he is not an ordinary child, but he is the God-man, he is God coming to us in human flesh and blood.

It really sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? It sounds like an impossibility. How can God become man?

Again, hear what the Angel said to Mary, "Greetings favored one. Do not fear. You have received grace from God. You will be with child and will give birth to a son." The child to be born would indeed be born, like any other human being on the face of this planet, born of a human mother.

And yet, Mary objected, "how can this be, since I am a virgin?" How can this be since she had not yet consummated her marriage to Joseph? Again, the angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." This is in direct fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that we have heard also this afternoon: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

This account of the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary is important for us, not merely as a wonderful and touching story of the birth of a child, but also it is important, yes, essential, because it helps us understand just who this child to be born is.

Who is this Jesus? And what difference does this child make? I think it would be safe to say that most people today think of Jesus as perhaps a prophet, perhaps a great teacher. And he certainly was those things. But often that is as far as many people are willing to go. In other words, they may admit that he existed as a man who lived some two thousand years ago and caused a great stir by his teaching, and they may even believe that he probably died by crucifixion, but they deny his divinity, that is, they deny that he is also true God.

I can't help but think of one of the founding fathers of our nation, Thomas Jefferson. I remember, when I was a seminarian, one of the books we had to read in Dr. MacKenzie's church history class was Thomas Jefferson's Bible. Thomas Jefferson thoroughly believed that Jesus taught the greatest system of morality and ethics known to man, but he denied that he was God. He predicted that once we can do away with the miracle and mystery of the birth of Jesus, we can then see him for what he really was, according to Jefferson, "a reformer of human errors."

Therefore, Thomas Jefferson produced a version of the gospels in which anything supernatural, all of the miracles of Jesus, for example, were removed, because, of course, such things were impossible.

But that does not accord with what the text handed down to us makes clear, that this Jesus, as we confess in the Creeds, was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and that he would be the Son of God, the Son of the Most High, that this Jesus whom we confess, is "very God of very God."

It is true that from the perspective of our human understanding it is impossible to see how God could become man, or, on the other hand, how a man to be God. But God makes possible, the impossible. When Mary, marveling, asked the question, "How can this be?" the answer of the Angel was something that we all can remember, "Nothing is impossible with God."

And so the Son to be born of the Virgin Mary would live up to his name, Jesus, (Yahweh saved) for he was the means by which God would deliver his people from their

sin: Born a man, so he could take our place, so he could be tempted in every way, just as we are, so he could live the perfect life for us, so he could give up his life for us, so he could be raised again on the third day, for us.

Born true God, so that what he would do for us would take on an unlimited dimension, born true God, so that the perfect life of that one man, would be sufficient for all, and the giving up of his life, would be sufficient for all, and his resurrection, would be sufficient for all, so that all Jesus did while dwelling among us would take on that unlimited scope, which is possible because he is true God. (pause)

But notice, also, what we learn here about the way God works. This is an important part of the whole drama of this season, especially as we think about our own worth in God's eyes, and our service in the church, and even the missionary nature of the church, and the part each child of God plays in the accomplishment of his purposes. As we have heard, this God "does not what anyone to perish, but that all would come to repentance." But we see that God did not chose the mighty, he didn't chose the famous or wealthy, he didn't chose the powerful or the influential, but rather he chose this humble girl, this humble girl from an insignificant humble village, to bring about the greatest event in human history—the salvation of mankind.

How many times do we feel inadequate for the task that God has placed before us? As a seminary professor, I have counseled with students who have come to me feeling burdened down by their studies, or by other problems in their lives, and by how sometimes they simply feel like they don't have much to offer. They become discouraged and wonder if they really belong in the ministry, if they can ever be a pastor. Sometimes students have come to me because they are worried that they don't have much ability as public speakers, or as great teachers, or as theologians, and they begin to get down on themselves and even start talking about leaving seminary.

Isn't that always our human tendency? We want to take the things that really belong to God, and to try to make them our responsibility. When it comes to service in God's kingdom, we think it's about us, about what we can do, or what we cannot do, but we think it's about us, when it's not about us at all, it's about God, and what he can do!

What we learn here is that God can and does use even humble people, and through those people causes great things to happen. Certainly Mary was a pious, God fearing young woman, but there was nothing really in her that caused her to be chosen by God, but God chose her to give birth to Jesus, well, just because he chose her, and that's about all we can say. And the same can be said for Mary's older relative Elizabeth, who was beyond the age of childbearing, and yet God chose to use her too, to perform the impossible, to have a son in her old age, John the Baptizer, who would prepare the way for the Lord.

And God doesn't just use ordinary people, he uses even the most unlikely of people; people like Saint Paul, who was a vicious persecutor of the church, an enemy of the church, an enemy of Christ, who was there present and participating when Stephen was put to death by the angry mob, and God could even perform the miracle of changing his stony heart, and used him as one of the mightiest missionaries of all times. Yes, God does make possible, the impossible.

History is full of examples of ordinary men and women whom God has used in mighty ways, according to his purposes, to fulfill his purposes. Even today, God continues to use common, ordinary people, to see that the word of this God-man,

announced in our text today, this eternal kingdom of Jesus, this message of peace and hope and joy, would go out and would be preached all around the world, right up to this very day, as people continue to hear that they can stop being afraid, that they can stop their striving after worthless idols, that amidst all the trials and struggles of this life, they have a God who comes to them giving them hope and freedom, and release from the bondage of their sin.

God continues make his love known to us today, in unpretentious ways. He continues to use simple, humble, common means, such as water—the water of baptism; or when he comes to us in such common elements like bread and wine, with his body and blood, for the forgiveness of our sins.

We sometimes may get the impression that the gospel has been spread around the world because of the great powerful preachers, but in fact the gospel continues to grow and live among us because God uses common, ordinary people, like you and me, and common ordinary, but faithful, pastors and teachers, to speak that word of life to those around us wherever we might be.

And so that is what we try to help our students remember at the seminary too, that their future ministries, wherever God may lead them, are going to depend, not on their superior intelligence or skill or great abilities or finally on anything in them, but on the God who uses us in our weaknesses and in our frailties. In fact, the Apostle Paul was making that very point when he said, “I rejoice in my weaknesses, because when I am weak, then I am strong.” He means, of course, is that when he is weak, Christ is strong in him.

So we see that this season is about so much more than how we are greeted at Walmart. We see so much happening in the announcement of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. We see God breaking into our world, coming among us, preparing the salvation of the world through his Son Jesus Christ, fulfilling all of the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures. And we also see God using—for this mighty, world-changing work—using humble means and humble servants, using people like Mary, and Elizabeth. And he continues to use lowly servants like you and me.

Here Mary serves as a model of the humble hearing of God’s Word and the trusting response of faith created by that Word—the Word now made flesh in her womb. And so also, we too, as we contemplate the great mystery of God with us and for us, we too, can respond, like Mary, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me, just as you have said.” Remembering that God makes possible, the impossible.