

Four Impossibilities for the New Year
Luke 1:37
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
January 3, 2016

I read of two nuns traveling by car one Sunday afternoon in the English region of Cotswold. They were dressed in their traditional clothing, habits. It was a beautiful day and they were entranced by the beauty of the countryside. They neglected the gauges on their car. They found themselves out of gas. There were no cars around, so they began to hitchhike. A motorist took pity and stopped, but it was a Sunday. There were no petrol stations open for miles around. They remembered a general store a couple of miles away. At the store they were able to purchase some gasoline, but they had no container in which to put the petrol. The motorist helping them remembered that he had a child's training potty in his trunk. They bought the petrol and put it into the training potty.

A little while later, back at their car, the two nuns are standing by the side of the road, with the gas tank open, pouring petrol into the empty tank from the training potty. At that moment, a Rolls Royce comes upon them, jams on the breaks. The back window rolls down and two Arab sheiks look out. They said to the nuns, "Ladies, we are not of your religion, but we certainly admire your faith."

Today's message is a bit different. Instead of the exposition of a passage of holy scripture, it will be an extended meditation on one verse. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her she will bear a son. She responds with a valid question: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel tells her that her pregnancy will occur through the power of God. Mary's pregnancy will be out of the ordinary, extraordinary, remarkable, unbelievable, unexpected and unprecedented. Gabrielle's message to Mary breaks the rules by which we live our lives. Mary knows it. The angel knows it. You and I know it. And it is for this reason that the angel Gabriel adds an additional observation. He knows this is an incredible message. He adds, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Let us think together about the impossible today. When we talk about what is impossible, we need to remember that there are different ways in which we speak of the impossible.

Different meanings of "impossible"

"For nothing will be impossible with God."

Sometimes, we may say that something is impossible, but what we mean is that it is difficult. For example, there are some companies that specialize in very difficult jigsaw puzzles. They might produce a puzzle that does not have an even border; or they include in the box seven extra pieces that do not fit at all in the puzzle.

Illusionists and magicians specialize in doing the impossible: you cannot saw a woman in half, or make a tiger disappear, or be crushed by a steam roller on a bed of glass – but the illusionist does all these things and more. But of course, we are not *in the know*. We do not understand the tricks, gimmicks, the special equipment and the sleight of hand. The manager of a moving company told me that she had overseen the shipment of the magician David Copperfield's equipment in and out of Warsaw, Poland. She said that she could not comprehend the use or purpose of a significant portion of the stuff shipped in for the show.

There are also philosophic impossibilities: conundrums such as, "Can God make a rock so big that even God could not lift it?" Or consider, "The following sentence is false. The preceding sentence is true." We gain tremendous pleasure in seeing the seemingly impossible vanquished. This is much of the appeal of the Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker movies. [By the way, the newest Star Wars, *The Force Awakens*, is a delight.]

Sometimes, as people we face impossibilities in the unfolding of our lives. For example: When the doctor speaks the C word – cancer – and hope seems to flee; or when a child dies, and mom and dad rightfully think that it will be impossible to live on.

It is at such times as this, in order to face the impossible, that we need the help of someone greater than ourselves. If something is impossible to us, then that means that we do not possess the resources or abilities within ourselves to overcome it. We must look to another, to something or someone greater than ourselves. We look to the Lord.

This brings us to the most comforting verse in the Bible.

The most Comforting Verse in the Bible -- Luke 1:37 - "For with God, nothing is impossible."

"For nothing will be impossible with God."

As we begin this New Year, if you face impossible situations in your life, then God wishes to remind you that with him, if he is involved, then nothing is impossible. Do not doubt it. Our God is Lord of the Impossible!

To prove the truth of that assertion, let us look at four "impossible" works God has accomplished, each of which is quite impossible in our own effort and understanding. These are four impossible accomplishments: each much greater than anything you will ever see Captain America, Iron Man or Wolverine do.

Four Impossibilities Made Possible by God.

The first is the impossible miracle: The Virgin birth.

The Impossible Miracle -- The Virgin Birth

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

I have heard people attribute belief in the Virgin Birth to chronological snobbery. They say, “Well, people back then might believe that because they did not know how babies came to be. We are more sophisticated today. We know better.” Such a statement is absurd. People in the ancient world knew perfectly well how babies come onto the scene. Gabriel tells Mary she will have a baby and Mary responds with the obvious natural question, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

A **Presbyterian** colleague told me of one exchange that took place during his ordination trial. He was examined and ordained in the 1960's. One pastor stood up and asked the young man being examined for ordination, ‘*Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?*’

The young man replied, ‘Yes.’

After a pause the pastor who had asked the original question stood again asking, ‘*Is that all you are going to say?*’

The candidate replied, ‘*That’s all you asked.*’

Over the past one hundred years the doctrine of the Virgin Birth has become controversial in some church circles. There are some who misunderstand the teaching of the doctrine. Many do not understand the doctrine's importance in the theology of redemption. On one hand, Jesus is born to Mary, establishing his full humanity. On the other hand, he is conceived through the special work of God, preserving Jesus from the burden of Original Sin. The uniqueness of Jesus' birth establishes him as the Second Adam, the New Adam. Jesus will save his people from sin because he is like us in all ways, except sinfulness.

The Virgin Birth is a statement about God's ability and sovereignty over nature. For God, nothing is impossible. The New Testament speaks of Jesus' brothers and sisters. They arrived in the normal fashion. But Mary's first pregnancy, the birth of Jesus, was unique. Gabriel's message to Mary (and to us) is ‘Yes, by human means, the phrase “*pregnant virgin*” is an oxymoron. But by God's power, purpose and resources, this is possible.’

Let us move to the second great impossibility God has accomplished: the impossible spiritual reality – the Incarnation.

The Impossible Spiritual Reality -- The Incarnation

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The first impossibility God makes possible is the virgin birth. It is a human impossibility. It reveals God's authority over nature. The second impossibility is both a human and divine impossibility: the incarnation.

What do we mean by '*incarnation*'?

In the early centuries of the Christian Church the leaders of the church engaged in arguments, discussions, and debate that eventually led to the articulation of our beliefs and convictions regarding how we understand the nature of the person of Jesus Christ.

One of the first battles revolved around a man named Arias. Arias taught that Jesus Christ was the greatest of God's creations. That Jesus was the first of God's creations. Arias taught that Jesus was '*of creation*.'

The church said that the problem with this belief, this teaching, is that if Jesus Christ is "of creation," even if he is the first and greatest of creation, that nonetheless lessens Christ's divinity. He cannot be both God and of the created order. The church fathers came together at the Council of Nicaea to address the conflict. It was there that they articulated what we know as the Nicene Creed. In reciting the Nicene Creed, we affirm what we believe regarding Jesus Christ. We believe "*in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father, before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father.*" The word 'begotten' is straight from John's gospel. The phrase, "Begotten, not made" is to counter the teaching of Arias that Jesus was of the created order. So too, the affirmation that Jesus is "before all worlds." Arias had said that there was a time when Jesus Christ "was not." What the creed declares is exactly what the Bible teaches. John 1:3 says of Jesus, All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

The creed also declares that Jesus is "being of one substance with the Father." The word 'substance' is a bit odd to modern ears. The more modern word would be "*essence*." The message being that Jesus Christ is God. He is of the same essence as God the Father. And, again, this affirmation is right out of the Bible. Colossians 2:9 tells us regarding Jesus, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." All that is in us, as humans, and all that is in God, is and always will be truly and distinguishably present in the one Lord Christ. In Jesus, who was fully human, the fullness of God also dwells.

How can this be?

This is a mystery. Recall the theological meaning of the word *mystery*. A problem can be solved. A mystery never will be. There is always something new to be learned from a mystery. God is a mystery. People are mysteries. The incarnation is a mystery. While we cannot explain it in its totality, the nature of the mystery is clear, that Jesus of Nazareth is Immanuel, God-with-us.

The first impossibility is a natural impossibility. The second is a theological impossibility. The third is a spiritual impossibility – salvation.

The Impossible Rescue -- Salvation

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,
⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved

The Bible is explicit regarding our status apart from Christ: we are dead in our sins and without hope and without God in the world.

In managing financial affairs, there are two types of bankruptcy declarations: Chapter 11 and Chapter 7. Chapter 11 bankruptcy refers to what is believed to be temporary bankruptcy. A corporation files Chapter 11 when it believes that there is hope for the future. What is needed is temporary protection, restructuring, refocus and renewal. Chapter 7 bankruptcy is permanent, end of the line, bankruptcy. Examples would include W.T. Grant, Best Stores, Eastern or Pan American Airlines. Filing Chapter 7 is a declaration of hopelessness.

Unfortunately, many people, when they think of their sins and failings, believe that they have declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Sure, they know they are sinners, they are spiritually bankrupt. But they also believe that they have some resources. They do good deeds. They give to charity. Their intentions are good. They are doing the best they can. And, so they believe, Christ makes up for what is lacking. We contribute our part, and Christ makes up the rest.

Over the years I have acquired money from various places in the world that I keep in a box. If I took this money to a bank to exchange it for dollars, the bank teller would literally laugh in my face. Egyptian pounds, Yugoslavian dinars, discontinued Turkish lira or Polish zlotys: they have no value. They are worth nothing. In a comparable way, our good deeds have no value in God's economy. We do not possess a currency with which to pay God back.

The problem for many people in our world is that when they consider their relationship to God, they think that they are in Chapter 11 spiritual bankruptcy, and they must learn that in fact they are in Chapter 7 spiritual bankruptcy. Most people intuitively know that they owe a debt to God. They create in their minds confidence in the good that they do. They think that they are earning moral currency with each good deed in order to repay God. They think that good deeds are the currency they will offer to God in payment of their debt. They believe they

are above average, ahead of the curve. When they compare themselves to others, they believe that they are ahead, that they are superior to others in moral practice. They tell themselves, “I am a good person” and believe that of course God will agree with this and acknowledge it to be so. We believe that God will accept the moral currency we have manufactured.

The problem of course is that we do not possess the moral currency God requires. There is no value in what we offer to God through our own moral power and effort. The prophet Isaiah captured this truth (64:6): all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. I will not give you a literal reading of polluted garment. It is too graphic. You would be offended. The truth is that in ourselves we have no resources to offer to God that can outweigh our revolt, rebellion and sin. We owe a debt we cannot repay. We must file chapter 7. It is a total loss. The situation is hopeless.

However, into this bleak situation enters Christ. Ephesians 2:4 – 5 tells us, But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. It is Christ’s righteousness that pays the debt. It is his work that is the moral currency acceptable to God. There is nothing we do. It is all Christ.

This, then, is the third impossibility – for our new year: our rescue from a debt we could not pay - our salvation. The last impossibility is the impossible dream: our sanctification.

The Impossible Dream -- Sanctification

¹⁸And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

In brief review: the first is a natural impossibility – the Virgin Birth. The second is a theological impossibility – the incarnation. The third is a spiritual impossibility – our salvation. The fourth is an existential impossibility – sanctification.

If he was unhappy with the play calling of an umpire, the great baseball manager, Earl Weaver, would get in the ump’s face and ask, “Are you going to get any better, or is this it?”

This, of course, is our problem: on our own, in our own power, we cannot get better. We lack the resources to improve our lives. Why? There are two reasons why. The first is the scope of our corruption. The second is the nature of our battle. First the scope.

The consequence of humanity’s fall into sin, as told in Genesis 3, is the story of a four-fold separation. Adam and Eve are first separated from God. This

is why they hide themselves in the garden. Second, it is separation from themselves, revealed in their new found self-awareness. They are naked. Third is separation from each other as revealed in their efforts to assign blame for their disobedience: (3:12) The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Finally, there is separation of body and spirit at death. You can see why spiritual improvement is so challenging -- we are required to seek restoration in every significant aspect of our lives: God, ourselves and each other. And, at the end of life is death, which negates whatever progress we might have managed to make.

The second reason why it is so hard to make progress is because of the nature of the battle, the enemies we face. Historians tell us that during World War II Hitler's great mistake was to invade Russia. Not only was Russia a difficult region to invade, but it was also unwise to fight a war on two major fronts. Our human predicament is that we fight not on two fronts, but three: the world; the flesh; and the Devil. In our own power, the situation is quite hopeless.

At the same time, as with every other impossibility we have looked at, the solution is not within us. We do not sanctify ourselves. It is God who sanctifies. The Holy Spirit is the agent who brings sanctification about in our lives.

What is sanctification? It means two things: first, the elimination of sin from our lives; and second, the pressing and molding us into the image of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the life of any person who heard Christ's saving call and placed faith in Christ. As Lord, Christ is the legitimate governor of that person's life.

As you know, there are many places in our world where legitimate governments face the forces of rebellion: Yemen, Syria, Turkey, the Sudan, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq. These countries are legitimately governed, but there are rebel forces seeking to overthrow their rule. There is a comparable dynamic in a believer's life. Jesus Christ is the legitimate governor of our hearts. But, there are rebel troops at war within us, our hearts, minds, and lives are not fully yielded to Christ's rule. Sanctification is the spiritual process through which God eliminates sin and conforms us to the image of Christ. We want to be remade into the image of Christ. Sanctification involves becoming more Christ-like.

Close

We began with Luke 1:37, "For nothing will be impossible with God." We looked at four truths, four things, four realities, that reveal to us through the greatness of God's power at work in our world. They are: The Virgin Birth, the incarnation, the offer of salvation and process of sanctification. These things are not what we accomplish or do. They are God's work in our world and in our lives.

What problems do you face in your life today? What challenges are you carrying over in your life from 2015 to 2016? Are they problems at work; relationships; with your sense of self-worth and self-acceptance? Consider what God has already done on your behalf. He has sent Jesus, to be born of a virgin. Christ humbled himself to be born a man into our world. Christ, through his work on the cross has purchased our redemption, our salvation. And, Christ is at work within us to conform us to the image of Christ.

Since Christ has done all this on your behalf, how much more will he be concerned for you, your work, your loved ones, your needs?

Turn to him in believing faith this day.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.