

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, December 21, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"WITH GOD THE IMPOSSIBLE BECOMES POSSIBLE"

Luke 1:37 "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Do you like surprises? Well, it all depends, doesn't it? There are good surprises and not so good surprises. I hope there's at least one good surprise under the tree for each of you this Christmas.

A few years ago a hospital in London, England sent a letter to some patients telling them that they were pregnant. A hospital worker meant to send them letters telling them about rescheduled operations, but hit the wrong computer key. This resulted in over 30 recipients receiving letters saying "Your Doctor at such-and-such a hospital is pleased to inform you that you are expecting a baby." Among the recipients were six elderly men.

Can you imagine their surprise, not to mention the surprise and shock and anxiety of the women who received the letter? Some of them must have said "It's impossible!"

Mary must have been very surprised when the angel of the Lord first appeared to her. Mary was engaged to be married, but she had not lived with Joseph yet, and was forbidden to do so until they were married. She was probably only 16 years old. She was likely at her parents home doing some domestic chores when the angel Gabriel appeared and said to her, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." Mary was perplexed by his greeting, but Gabriel set her at ease. "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."

Then came an even bigger surprise. "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will call him Jesus. He 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." Mary would have been just as surprised and shocked at the news as those people who received the pregnancy letter from the hospital. Or just as shocked as I would be if someone told me I'd won \$10 million in Lotto 649. "How can this be?" I would ask, "since I've never bought a Lottery ticket in my life?" So Mary asked the natural question, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel told Mary that her pregnancy would occur at God's initiative and by God's power. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born to you will be called holy; he will be called Son of God." Gabriel added, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Now I know that's sometimes hard to believe. Things don't always happen according to our schedule or in a way we can predict. They happen in God's time and in God's way. So we keep praying and serving and believing, even when the going is tough and heaven seems silent. For nothing that God wills is impossible for God. Let's think today about some impossible things that become possible when God is involved. "For nothing will be impossible with God."

First, with God it's possible for God's Son to become a human.

Some people say, "A child conceived by and born to a virgin is impossible. It can't happen." Well, I grant you, not normally. But when Luke wrote of this he was not writing symbolically or mythically; he was writing literally. Luke the physician certainly knew the facts of life and he believed in the reality of a virginal conception and birth. He probably got the details from Mary herself.

And why should such a thing be impossible for the all-powerful God? I remember someone being asked whether or not he believed in the virgin birth. And he said something like, "Yes, I do. Every time I look at moon and the sun and the stars, or peer into a microscope at the incredible diversity and complexity of life, and remember that God created all this out of nothing, I think, what's a virgin birth for this God? No big deal, really." And it really isn't. "For nothing will be impossible with God." Indeed, such a unique conception and birth was necessary for one who would be called holy, the Son of God.

But there's something else about Jesus' birth that billions of people consider impossible, even scandalous. It's not the how of his birth, but who he was, his identity. Let's not miss the wonder of John's statement in chapter 1 of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." The Son of God, who was with the Father and the Spirit from before time began, became human flesh and dwelt with us. He is indeed, Emmanuel, God with us.

Now before you say, well, that's no big deal, let me tell you that it really is. You see, Christmas doesn't allow us to say, "Well, all religions really believe the same thing," for they really do not. Now we can get along with people of other

faiths and treat them as neighbours. That's not the issue. The issue is that at root, we believe different things about God and the nature of God. Our Muslim friends can't accept that God could have a Son. The idea that the God of this universe emptied himself and came among us in human flesh is a huge stumbling block for them. They say, "It's impossible; it can't happen."

But the Bible claims that it can happen and did happen. The God of the Bible is big enough to become small. Take that home with you. The Creator of this universe, the mighty God, is big enough to become small. God doesn't stand over and above the world, but actually entered into it himself, in the flesh and blood person of his Son. The mighty God became a lowly servant. And by becoming small God lifts us up. We must be pretty important to God if God takes on our nature. It may seem impossible, but the Bible says that God sent His only Son from heaven to earth to take on human flesh. Jesus was 100% God; and 100% human. It's breathtaking, really, a great mystery. But with God it's possible for God's Son to take on human flesh and dwell among us. "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Secondly, with God it's possible for sinners to be saved.

The Bible says that "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory." Everyone who has ever lived, who lives now, and will yet come into the world - everyone of us is a sinner. And our sin would separate us from God forever. You see, we have to be holy to live with a holy God and we are definitely not holy. And there is nothing can do to make ourselves holy and save ourselves from our fate. Jesus once said to a rich young ruler, "How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It's harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed. If a man who seemed to have God's blessing on his life couldn't be saved by his piety and his good works then who could be saved? But Jesus said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God." With God it's possible for sinners to be saved.

This is the prime reason that Jesus came into the world. He came to do what we can't do for ourselves. Gabriel told Mary that Jesus would be called "holy." Jesus was like us in all respects except that he was without sin. He was holy. And we cannot speak of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem without speaking of his death 33 years later in Jerusalem. On the Cross our sins were laid on Jesus so that when we put our trust in Him his holiness or righteousness is transferred onto us. It the great exchange - our sin for Christ's holiness. Paul tells us that "he who had no sin became sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." By our faith in the Son of the Most High God, who died and rose again and reigns forever we are forgiven and made fit to spend

eternity with God. God looks at us just as he looks at Jesus and says, "You are my beloved child forever." It is a miracle. "For by grace you have been saved, it is not your own doing; it is of God."

A man was asked, "Are you saved?" "Yes, I am," he said, "When were you saved?", the questioner demanded. And he answered with words from the Apostle's Creed, "When Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day rose again." That is the right answer with one proviso, that you add the words, "I believe." God has acted to save us through Christ and for that salvation to take effect in our lives, you and I must not just recite facts, we must say, "I believe." And even that faith is made possible by God's grace. If you truly desire that faith God will stir it up within you. "For nothing is impossible with God." With God it's possible for sinners to be saved, and so we are - through Jesus Christ..

One more thing. **With God ordinary people can become extraordinary servants of God.**

Gabriel said to Mary, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." Mary was much perplexed by his words. She was thinking, "Favoured? Me? I haven't done anything special. I'm just ordinary." Mary was not expecting this, nor had she earned the role. Now later generations of Christians have given Mary much adulation and no doubt she had characteristics God wanted in the mother of his Son. But all in all, it seems she was quite ordinary. Then she heard the angel's incredible message. Did Mary sense what would be ahead of her if she said "Yes" - having to share the pregnancy with Joseph and imagining his reaction, knowing the shame of pregnancy before marriage, and what it would mean to be the mother of God's Son, the heartache she would suffer because of his suffering. Whether she sensed all that or not, she still responded, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." Mary, the ordinary village girl became an extraordinarily servant of the Lord and gave birth to God's Son. She set aside her own plans and priorities in order to obey God's word. That's what an extraordinary servant does.

An older gentleman was commenting to his wife that couples don't use the word "obey" in marriage ceremonies anymore. "Too bad, isn't it?" he said, "It used to lend a little humor to the occasion." Obedience isn't in fashion today. Yet obedience to God is a vital part of the Christian life. You might be an ordinary person, but you can be an extraordinary servant of the Lord, not because you are special, but because God is with you and because nothing is impossible with Him. And small things done faithfully play a very important role in God's Kingdom.

So God calls you and me, ordinary Christians indeed, to be obedient servants, to make the presence of Christ real through word and deed. We are not Mary, but Christ can be born in us and through us, here and now. So let the Christmas story fill you with wonder and faith and love. And then wonder of wonder, you may find yourself saying to God, "Here am I; the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." "For nothing will be impossible with God."