

The Power of With
Luke 1:26-38
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 21, 2008

This well-known passage from Luke's gospel includes some of the most powerful words in all the Scripture: "Nothing is impossible with God." Nothing is impossible with God. Now I know that as soon as I say that, your head begins to fill up with all the things in your life or in the world that *are* impossible, or at least, *seem* impossible to you.

Maybe it seems impossible that you will finish your shopping and get everything wrapped and under the tree by Wednesday night. Maybe it seems impossible that your marriage will ever be all that you hoped for, or even just a bit of what you hoped for. Maybe it seems impossible that your kids will ever get it together and be independent, responsible adults. Maybe it seems impossible that you will ever get settled in a job you really love. Maybe it seems impossible that you will survive the diagnosis you recently received or have been living with for months or years. Maybe it seems impossible that you will ever have any financial security after what's happened these last few months.

I don't know what you came in here with today that seems impossible to you. Maybe if we could ask every one of you to share, it would be something different for each person. But I know that there are things you are thinking about that seem impossible. I know that because there are things *I'm* thinking about that seem impossible.

The angel comes to Mary with these words: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is *with* you." You know the story: Gabriel tells the virgin from Nazareth that the Lord is *with* her, that she has found favor *with* God and that therefore, she will be *with* child. And furthermore, just to show off, maybe, he tells her that Elizabeth, a relative of Mary's, is also with child. Like Sarah and so many other biblical women before her, Elizabeth has been unable to conceive her whole life and is now too old to have a baby. "For nothing is impossible...*with* God." Ahh, the power of one little four-letter preposition: *with*. The whole season of Advent and Christmas is defined by this one little word: 'with.' Jesus is Emmanuel. God with us. Because of what the angel announces to Mary, it is no longer just God...and us. Because of the baby Mary will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is now to be God *with* us.

"You have found favor with God," the angel says. Favor with God - that sounds good. Who wouldn't want 'favor with God'? But this story teaches us that "favor with God" doesn't always look like we think it should. In fact, I would bet you a new flat screen TV that Mary would not have put these two things together: Favor with God and being with child. I think Doug made it pretty clear to us last week how Mary might feel about that if she were a modern teenager. [Oh, it was too funny; if you weren't here, you really should get the CD.]

The root of the Greek word "favor" means to honor with blessings. It is the same root as grace, good will, pleasure. So we tend to think that enjoying favor with God means to receiving blessings like health and happiness, material blessings, prosperity, success, etc. But that's not exactly what the angel is talking about here. "You are highly favored," the angel says to Mary,

because “the Lord is *with* you.” Well, *that* sounds pretty good, too. But what the angel says next could *not* have sounded good to Mary. Because she has found favor *with* God and the Lord is *with* her, she will be *with* child. But Mary is a virgin. She knows that what the angel has said to her is impossible. Even simple peasant girls from small country towns know how babies are made. And *this* isn’t the usual way. This seemed impossible to her – it *was* impossible. And it must have been more than a little scary.

Maybe that’s why Gabriel begins with: “Do not be afraid.” “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.” Though we generally think being the recipient of God’s favor is a good thing, it can also be a frightening thing. Being favored by God and doing what God tells you to do can be scary. Because very often what God considers favor doesn’t look favorable to us. Very often what God tells us to do, or what He is going to do in us or through us, seems difficult, impossible, or even crazy. Stay in a marriage that feels loveless and hopeless. Refuse to give in to urges and tendencies that feel natural and good to us but are clearly defined by God as sin: gossip, bitterness, unforgiveness, addiction, sexual behavior outside the covenant of marriage. Turn the other cheek. Give sacrificially to help others. These things are hard to do and often seem, frankly, unreasonable. And they don’t *feel* good, either. We don’t want to do them, or *not* do them. That’s why we need Emmanuel – God *with* us. God doesn’t need *us* to do the impossible, but we need Him. There is power in that little preposition.

And so Gabriel speaks those powerful words: “Nothing is impossible with God.” Now, if I were to ask for a show of hands, most of you would say this statement is true and that you believe it. Nothing is impossible with God. But if it’s true and we believe it, then why do we worry? If it’s true and we believe it, then why do we suffer from anxiety and depression and discouragement and fear? We *say* we believe these words, but we don’t *act as if* we believe them. We *say* they are true, but we don’t *behave as if* they are true. We *say* we believe they are true, but we don’t even always *pray* as if they are true. Why? I’ll tell you why: I think it’s because to say that ‘nothing is impossible with God’ begs another, more difficult question: If nothing is impossible with God, why doesn’t He do the impossible things I ask Him to do? Since we don’t see Him do the impossible, or at least, He doesn’t always do the impossible things *we* ask Him to do the way *we* want Him to do them, maybe He *can’t* really do the impossible.

This is where it becomes so important that we are clear on the absolute reliability of the Scriptures. Listen: The Bible is true. These words are true. I don’t mean that every word of the Bible is *literally* true. Many are. Some are poetic words, language that expresses truth more clearly than the truest true statement. But the Bible is true and it is Truth. So when we come to a place where what the Bible says seems *not* to be true – or seems not to be true for us – seems to contradict what we are feeling, we must examine our feelings in light of what the Bible says rather than the other way around. See, our tendency is to start with our feelings or our understanding and see if the Bible matches up, and if it doesn’t we reject the truth of the Scripture and trust our feelings instead. It’s okay, and very natural, to start with your feelings. But the next move is to go to the Scripture to see what it says. And if what it says seems to contradict what we are feeling or what *seems to be* true and right to us, then it is our feelings, our understanding, that must be adjusted, not the Scripture that is to be adjusted or rejected.

You see, just because nothing is impossible *with* God or *for* God does not mean that God will do whatever we ask just because we ask Him. And it most definitely does not mean that we will always like or understand what God does or how God will do what seems impossible in our lives. Just because you *can* give your child a new car on her 16th birthday doesn't mean you should or you will. It might not be good for her. Nothing is impossible with God. But not everything we want is good for us. Not everything we want is part of God's plan for us or for the world.

God has a plan. That is very clear: "In the sixth month, God sent the angel..." God has a plan and He is working His plan in His time. *In His time*. Somebody needs to hear and believe this today: "Nothing is impossible with God." Some of the most powerful words every spoken by God. If we believe them. If we are operating and *co-operating with God*.

Mary's reply to the angel is just as powerful as the angel's words: "May it be to me as you have said." In other words: "I'm in." Whatever God says, I'll do. Whatever." You see, Mary believed what God said through the angel. She believed in the power of 'with.' She believed that when Gabriel said "Nothing is impossible with God" it meant nothing is impossible with God. And she was willing to make herself available for whatever that was. Whatever. Even though she surely could not have comprehended in that earth-shattering moment HOW she would become a mother and HOW she would fulfill such a monumental task as raising the Son of God. Still, she said, "May it be to me as you have said." She must have believed that if God said it, He would help her do it. And that is true: God does not call us to a task He will not prepare us to perform.

So what is God calling you to do today that seems impossible to you? Nothing is impossible with God. What does God want to give birth to in your life? All through the Bible, we see that God brings life and light where there is only deadness and darkness. What is it that seems impossible – dead, barren, lifeless – in your life right now? Nothing is impossible with God.

Leaders: What is God calling us to do as a church that seems impossible: not enough money, not the right people, not the right resources? What is it that seems impossible in our ministry, mission, and vision right now? Nothing is impossible with God.

It's not just "nothing is impossible." That little preposition is important, key, in fact: *With* God. The Lord is *with you*. Not just "the Lord *is*." Though of course, He is. The Lord is *with you*. The Lord is *with us*. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. So nothing is impossible.

But, with God's call comes a need to be responsive to His leading. God shows His awesome power and greatness here and elsewhere in the Scriptures in often very unexpected ways: By working with anyone on the street who is willing to be used by Him. God works *with us*. It's not that God *needs* us to accomplish His plans. God does not need *us* to do the impossible. But God often chooses to work *with and through* us to do what seems *to us* to be impossible. Maybe you've heard this – it's really true: God is not interested in your ability, just your availability. Mary's ability to become pregnant was rather limited, we would say, by her virginal status. But Mary was willing to make herself available to be used by God. Even though what God was asking her to do was impossible.

God is still in the business of making the impossible possible as His people make themselves available to be used by Him. What Jesus wants for Christmas from you is your availability. Are you willing to say, as Mary did, “May it be to me as you have said,” whatever that means? Are we, as a church family, willing to say, as Mary did, “May it be to us as you have said,” whatever that means? “Whatever, God. We’re willing to do whatever, say whatever, go wherever, give whatever. Because *You* say so.”

That’s why we’re still talking about Mary all these centuries later. Her radical responsiveness to the will of God is stunning. But it’s simple, really. Mary believed God. She believed that the Lord *was* with her and that nothing is impossible *with* God. And it’s still true. Christmas reminds us of the power of ‘with.’ In Jesus, God *is* with us. And so nothing is impossible – *nothing* – nothing is impossible with God.