

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 17, 2013

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 1:26-38

Creed 5

## **...Who was Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary**

Today we are wonderfully “out of season” as we hear the stories we typically hear on Christmas Eve, sing a Christmas hymn, hear a Christmas anthem and ponder what it means for God to be born in the world in the way in which He was.

And while the two versions of the story I read seem at first to focus each on Joseph and then Mary, really these stories are not about them – but about God. That is always the question we bring to any passage in the Bible – what does this say about God?

And the answer is in Luke 1:37 – Nothing is impossible with God.

These words spoken to Mary not only sum up the birth stories of both John the Baptist and of Jesus, but also invoke a memory of other occasions of improbability in which God intervened to provide a son. He did this for Abraham and Sarah, Hannah and Elkanah (OT) and Zechariah and Elizabeth (NT), all of whom were beyond child-bearing years.

But each of those situations of barrenness was only improbable, improbable because at their age and in their circumstances, who would expect a child like Isaac, Samuel or John the Baptist? But the birth Gabriel is announcing to Mary is not just improbable, it is impossible: Mary is a virgin.

That is beyond anyone's comprehension—no more plausible to Mary than to us—as Mary so openly testifies when she replies: "How can this be, since I know no man, since I am a virgin?" And the angel responds in much the same way the angel responded to disbelieving Abraham and Sarah, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

It is a reminder that the God we worship and serve, the God about to be revealed in the babe soon taking shape in Mary's womb, is a God of power and wonder, wonder and power beyond any limitation that you and I might conceive.

But this is not simply about the wonder of God's power to do the impossible in Mary. This is also about the wondrously impossible things God is going to do in and through this child. This conception is just the beginning of more wonderful and impossible things: forgiving sins, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, strengthening the lame, and raising the dead.

All of that is yet to come and will come to its climax with an even greater wonder and even more astonishing impossibility: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, his appearance to his followers, and his ascension into heaven. Yet the wonder and impossibilities do not stop there.

Because seven weeks later, the Spirit who conceived Jesus in Mary's womb will be the same Spirit poured out upon believers at Pentecost to make them brothers and sisters of Jesus and in Jesus who will, like Mary, become God-bearers – sharing the good news and bringing to birth the Church of Jesus Christ.

With God nothing is impossible. Those who dismiss this event and the power behind it, because it is scientifically impossible, miss the entire point: we are not talking about a receptive virgin, we are not talking about what is plausible or scientifically possible, we are not talking gynecology; this is theology – talk about God.

As Fred Craddock has written, "This is the creed behind all other creeds." With God, nothing is impossible. And we must confess that daily, not simply at Christmas, not simply at Easter, but on every occasion of impossibility we encounter in life.

Another theme in this story is that the God of the impossible is also the God of grace. Again, this is not about Mary and her ability to say, "Let it be to me according to your word." This is about the grace of God entering human life. Remember Gabriel's greeting to Mary, "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.... You have found favor with God."

It slips by us in English, but the word behind "favor" and "favored one" is the word for grace. It can equally be translated, "Greetings graced one...!" Mary is being caught up in the drama of God's grace; she is graced. But once again, it's not about Mary.

If there is something about Mary, we certainly don't know it from what the Bible says here. All we get is a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, who is of the house of David. Beyond that, she is no different than anyone else. There is nothing here about her virtue or her worthiness – nothing that would explain to us why God should choose her - simply that He did.

This, of course, is the point: God does choose to do things simply out of His grace. God chose to create the world out of nothing—speaking of the impossible. If you struggle to believe in the virgin birth, maybe spend more time pondering creation, which God accomplished out of nothing—with a word.

All of God's creating and choosing is done out of His grace and no one's merit. All the major players in God's story are not just ordinary, but are superbly flawed people—and because they are flawed, they need God and His grace. The emphasis is important here—it's not that God needs these people to accomplish something, but that these people need God to accomplish anything.

King David for example: God chose David to be king out of grace; and when David decided it was time to build a house for God (the Temple), God said "No. You've too much blood on your hands for that. Rather, I will build a house for you"—more grace! "I will raise up your son who shall build a house for my name, and will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me." (2Samuel 7:12)

And we hear these words again as Gabriel tells Mary who her child will be. This is about God's grace breaking into the world for everyone.

*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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.* (Luke 1:32-33)

What does it mean to respond to such grace? Well, Mary's first response might seem a bit jarring to us. "I am a servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word." But really, the Greek word for servant is the harsher, slave. "I am the Lord's slave," she says. This is not a voluntary relationship dependent upon Mary's cooperation or volition. God has spoken, it is happening; and Mary can't help but embrace it.

This is what it means to be the object of God's grace; it binds us. I mean, truly, could Mary do otherwise? Can we? God's grace descends upon us, captures us, and sets us on a path in which impossible things start happening!

The Word God spoke at the beginning, through whom all things came into being, is the same Word being spoken over Mary to begin a new creation in her. It is that same Word that is spoken to you and to me, the creative and gracious power of God, not only to cause things to come into being, but the gift He gives of Himself to each of us.

It's not about Mary. It's about God, for whom nothing is impossible; God who is first and foremost a God of Grace; God who chooses ordinary humans of all stature and circumstance to become slaves for and to His own purposes; God who speaks and comes to birth in us as members of God's new creation.

In this story her name happens to be Mary. But hers is not the only story being told here. It is your story; it is my story as well. God has chosen each of us, favored each of us, graced each of us, and spoken His Word to, over, and in each of us. By the power of His Spirit, God has descended upon us and conceived Christ in us.

Like Mary, you and I are God bearers, an identity and calling that brings with it extraordinary privileges, and significant hardships. You see, God does not seem particularly interested in the usual way of doing things. "We've never done it that way before" doesn't cut it with God.

As we try to determine whether what we are hearing is the voice of God, we can look at a number of things, but the story of the Virgin Birth tells us that we can't turn off the voice just because what we are hearing seems impossible or outside of society's comfort zone.

But the promise remains the same: no matter the hardships or impossibilities this graced calling may bring in life, nothing is impossible for the One we serve and bear.

That's what we believe when we believe in Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

So let's stand and profess the faith of the church in the words of the Creed. [recite Creed]

And that, my friends is what Christians get to believe! Amen.