

God's Love Comes Down From Heaven  
Luke 1:26-38  
Mike Magee - Brentwood First - 12/21/08

God's love is not what we expect.

*<sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>34</sup>The angel said to her, <sup>37</sup>"Nothing will be impossible with God."*

Today's Gospel, today's good news, is a story of impossibilities. Consider the impossibilities Mary faced in this story: She is a virgin and pregnant—she is having a child while she is a virgin? Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Joseph has to follow through on the marriage after he discovers Mary is pregnant? Impossible! Mary must avoid being stoned to death when the neighbors hear the news? Impossible!

Consider the impossibility Elizabeth faced. She was well past the childbearing age, and yet God says she is going to conceive and bear a child? This impossible news left old Zechariah speechless. Impossible! No way! Won't happen!

This is a story of biblical impossibilities. But, what are the impossibilities in our world 2000 years later? What would you label "impossible" in your life? Peace in our world. Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Our church reaching our surrounding community and making our world different? Impossible! Restoring relationships, healing past hurts in our lives. Breaking an addiction and overcoming past hurts and disappointments? Impossible!

We find ourselves with the same troubled mind as Mary, wondering over the impossible. We even ask the same question Mary asked, "How can this be?" To us it seems impossible! No way! Won't happen! The real question for people today is "How can the impossible become possible?"

We call it the virgin birth, and it is one of the most incredible ideas. Many of us may accept the virgin birth of Jesus on the basis of biblical authority, but we do not understand it. There was once a girl named Kristin. She was a bright and sensitive girl, but she does not understand everything she hears in church. (I am sure that many of us can identify with that!) One day when Kristin was in the cafeteria at school, one of her friends asked her, "Are you a virgin?" Kristin was now in the hot seat because she did not know what a virgin was. But she did some quick thinking that went like this: The only virgin she had heard of was Mary, and everyone knows that Mary had a baby. Therefore, a virgin must be a woman who has had a baby.

Thus armed with that conclusion, Kristin announced loudly to her friend in the cafeteria, "No! I am not a virgin!" As several people nearby registered their shock, one little boy leaned over and whispered in her ear: "Kristin, I don't think you know what you are talking about!"

Many of us, adults included, do not know what we are talking about when we are asking about the virgin birth, but as I understand it, the virgin birth means that Jesus came from God. He is God's child. The emphasis is not primarily on Mary, but on the creative life-giving power of God. As one theologian says, Jesus is not the product of human evolution. He is the product of the intervention of a transcendent God into human history. How can this be? Nothing is impossible with God.

But what does the gift of God's son mean?

### God loves us first and unconditionally

*<sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*

I had a conversation with a friend some time ago, and was shocked to find out he thought the only situation of unconditional love was the love of a mother for her child. That friends are not expected to have unconditional love for each other! That even God does not love us unconditionally.

Why do we put limitations on the breadth and depth of God? I believe it is because humankind can only think analogously. That is, we can only relate to our own experiences. For example, we have trouble loving our own friends. So how can we possibly imagine loving strangers? Those strangers who are different than us? When we cannot even love our own friends. Friends who have sinned against us. I suggest to you that God can love those we consider strange, and those who sin. God can even love us! Because nothing is impossible with God.

In Apostle Paul's **early** letters, he viewed sin as a hostile power, and justification as our deliverance from this hostile power. In his letter to the Ephesians, perhaps written at the **end** of his career, he has what some might call a more seasoned view. He views sin more simply as individual trespasses, and deliverance from sin, that is removal of sin, as simply forgiveness. That God forgives our sins, and God wants us to forgive each other's sins. This is the nature of unconditional love.

If there is a heresy today it is that we're so preoccupied with other things that we fail to pay attention to the fact of God's spectacular unconditional love, mercy, and forgiveness. God's miraculous unmerited love in evidence all around us. If we but stop and reflect, it will knock us off our feet! God's Son is born to bring us a Second Birth, all the while we are laboring under the assumption that we have to earn God's love. We need not be afraid, for we have found favor with God.

But how is God's unconditional love relevant other than to ivory tower theologians? Just exactly for whom is God's love doled out?

### God's love is shockingly all inclusive

*<sup>33 b</sup>And of his kingdom there will be no end."*

In Robert Buchanon's novel, "The Shadow of the Sword," he describes a chapel of hate. Over its black ruins on a bleak moor stands a doorway with the name of the chapel, dedicated to "Our Lady of Hate." Buchanon writes, "In hours of passion and pain, came men and women to cry curses on their enemies - the maiden on her false lover, the lover on his false mistress, the husband on his false wife - praying, one and all, that Our Lady of Hate might cause the hated one to die within the year." And the novelist adds with a sarcastic twist, "So bright and so deep does the gentle Christian light show within their minds." We laugh, but are we so far from the chapel of hate? We hate the democrats or the republicans. We hate the Muslims and the Christians who disagree with us. We hate the environmentalists or those who wish to develop our natural resources. We hate those who proclaim women's rights, and we hate those who proclaim unborn baby rights. We hate

tolerance and we hate intolerance. We make pronouncements characterized not by Christian charity but by a kind of condemning bitterness. Jonathan Swift said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

John 3:16 says "God so loved the world," not the church. The world. And the Greek in John 3:16 is even more shocking. The Greek word usually translated world is actually cosmos. God so loved the cosmos. Not just Presbyterians. Not just Americans. Not just Christians. Not just heterosexuals. The cosmos. Everyone. God loves the entire cosmos. God's wildly inclusive love, where his kingdom, his reign, will have no end. Will have no boundaries.

But what has God's unconditional and wildly inclusive love got to do with us in our every day life, where the rubber meets the road?

### Understanding God's love is relevant

*<sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

In 1912, one of the first anthropologists of religion, Émile Durkheim, wrote that religion is the cement of society--the means by which people turn from the everyday concerns in which they were enmeshed to a common devotion for sacred things. His definition of religion, favored by anthropologists of religion even today, is, "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them."

Durkheim condenses the function of religion into four areas:

1. Providing moral guidance
2. Cohesive, that is, bringing people together
3. Vitalizing, that is, to make a group more lively or vigorous
4. Euphoric, that is, to instill within the group a good feeling about itself

Durkheim considers religion "a projection of the social values of society." Religion, argues Emile Durkheim, is an expression of social cohesion. Durkheim wrote a lot about totems, from which we get our phrase totem pole.

According to Merriam Webster's College Dictionary, a totem is any entity that is thought to watch over or assist a group of people. Religious totems support groups larger than the individual person. Durkheim saw totemism as the most basic form of religion. To the totem is ascribed the values and characteristics a group holds most high. The virtues which a group considers most valuable.

The totem is usually an animal or figure that spiritually represents a group of related people. Some argue that totemism is based on physical or psychological similarities between the clan and the totem animal. Some propose totemism is based on the fact that the totem was 'good to eat.' But Durkheim argues that the reason for totems is metaphoric. Work with a tribe in the southern Sudan and aboriginals in Australia led anthropologists of religion to believe totems are a symbolic representation of the group, not

something that looks like members of the clan, and not something good to eat. But a metaphoric representation of the role model to which a group aspires.

Durkheim believes that individuals must internalize a group's values. Must internalize a culture's totems. Durkheim believes religion is a communal experience, not an individual one.

I believe the model for relationships between individuals and community is the model God shows us in Jesus. That the Church is God writ small. That is, we aspire in church to both see Jesus in our neighbor, and to be Jesus to our neighbor. But we do not always succeed. Some might say we never succeed. But we keep trying and God forgives *us* as *we* forgive each other. God knows the church, as does every human community, gives us ample opportunity to practice forgiveness.

Anne Lamott, author of the book "Traveling Mercies," tells of how in her church babies get passed around the moment they're brought into the sanctuary - everyone takes care of everyone else's babies. Every baby instantly has more parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles than he ever knew.

Imagine what that teaches children about Christian community! What they learn about love even as infants! For the adults everyone gets a chance to remember the miracle of birth, God's hand in our human being.

The reason we need to understand very clearly the unconditional nature and the non-particularity of God's love, is that God wants us to love each other the same way. Unconditionally, and without concern for how we look or think. Here we are, servants of the Lord. Let it be with us according to his Word.

### Conclusion

The Good News Gabriel gives Mary is shocking and unexpected. It blows our minds, just like it blew Mary's mind. The first way it is shocking is that we learn God loves us first. Before we love God, God loves us first. Because God's love for us is unconditional. The second way Gabriel's news is shocking is we learn the reign of God has no end. The reign of God has no boundaries. Because everyone belongs within God's sheepfold. God loves the entire cosmos. Shocking.

And here is the most shocking thing of all. God wants us to try real hard to love each other like God loves us. This is the message of Christmas. Not just that God loves us. But that God wants us to love each other.

I imagine some of you will not like what I am going to do to John F Kennedy's famous inaugural speech. I encourage you, at the end of your life, to ask yourself, not, "Does God love me?" Because God always has, and always will, love each and every one of you. Instead, I encourage you to ask yourself, "Have I loved the stranger as God loves me, unconditionally and without regard to religious, political, ethnic, social, economic, and gender persuasion? Have I loved the stranger as myself?"

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...