

“How Can This Be?” (Luke 1:26-38) Advent 4, December 21, 2008

Years ago, while I was leading a Bible study on our text, one of the people in the group admitted that when we came to the part of the creed that says “*conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary,*” she always crossed her fingers. Now, this person was not some puffed up college student or some ivory tower professor. She was a sweet, little old lady. So not wanting to jump to any conclusions, I asked her why she crossed her fingers. But I might as well have jumped, for she answered, “*Isn’t it obvious? A virgin birth is scientifically impossible.*” Taken aback, I asked whether she also crossed her fingers when we said the part about God creating the world or, for that matter, raising the dead. “*Of course not,*” she answered. “*Well,*” I said, “*compared to those miracles, I would think creating life in a virgin’s womb would be a snap!*” But she didn’t budge. No virgin birth. It was scientifically impossible.

Now, she was hardly the first to question whether a virgin birth is possible. That honor goes to the Virgin Mary herself. Nor was she the first not to believe in the virgin birth. That would be Joseph – at least, at the outset. Through the centuries, many have echoed Mary’s question, “**How can this be?**” And in our own day, many more have answered, “*It cannot be. A virgin birth is scientifically impossible.*”

But is it? In a congregation like ours, with so many scientists, such words don’t quite ring true, do they? In fact, I suspect you scientists kind of wince when you hear the term “*scientifically impossible.*” For if experience teaches anything, it is the need for a little more humility in this regard! Time and again, what had seemed scientifically impossible turned out to be quite possible, and things that were thought to be scientific fact turned out to be pure fiction.

Take the theory of **phlogiston**, for example. Ever heard of that? Maybe in a science history class. But for quite some time, it was considered scientific fact. The theory was that, in addition to the four classic elements – water, fire, earth, and air – there was a fifth element called **phlogiston** that had no color, odor, taste, or mass but was released when something caught fire. This neat little theory allowed chemists to explain phenomena like combustion, metabolism, and the formation of rust. Sadly, the theory had one fatal flaw: **phlogiston** doesn’t exist. In the 18th century, Lavoisier finally disproved this theory. But even after he did, some clung to it for quite a while. Kind of like some people today cling to theories like – oh, I don’t know – like “*a virgin birth is scientifically impossible.*”

Improbable perhaps. We have to grant that. But impossible? A little more humility, please! Especially if you’re a believer. After all, God created the laws of nature. Science is just the business of figuring them out and applying them – and it still has a long way to go! Not all the laws of nature are known. Who is to say all of them can even be known? Could it not be that our focus on what is tangible, measurable, predictable is as misguided as the phlogiston theory?

Could it not be that the distinction between what's natural and what's miraculous is purely artificial? Could it not be that what we call basic "laws" are only blurred hints of infinitely greater "laws" – that, in fact, our concepts of reality are as inaccurate as the proverbial three blind men trying to describe an elephant – the one touching its side saying it's like a wall; the next touching its tusk saying it's like a spear; and the last touching its trunk saying it's like a snake? Yes, a little more humility is called for – even from unbelievers but especially from Christians. We're just not in a position to say – of miracles in general and the virgin birth in particular – that's "*scientifically impossible*."

Okay, okay, some may be thinking, we get the point, pastor. But why make such a big deal out of something so unimportant? Answer: because it's not unimportant. To the contrary! It's very important. And here is why: what we believe about miracles connects directly to what we can believe about God.

Think about it. If you say that miracles don't happen, that is saying, in effect, that God doesn't intervene directly in human affairs. And if you write off a particular miracle as "*scientifically impossible*," that is saying, in effect, that God's power is severely limited – in fact, limited to what little *we understand* of nature's laws.

Now, if any of this were true, we'd sure have to rethink the Christian faith! For instance, what would happen to intercessory prayer if we couldn't expect God to intervene directly in our lives? We'd merely be casting wishes out into the void! And what would happen to our hope of eternal life? "*Scientifically impossible*" would mean "dead is dead," end of discussion! For that matter, what would happen to our belief that God has specifically given us moral laws, that He has worked out a plan for our salvation, or that He has done anything whatsoever since creating the world? And hitting closer to home, how would we be able to trust in God for guidance, support, and strength? If God didn't intervene directly in human affairs, we'd be stuck with a very distant God, not one who is lovingly present and involved in our lives. And if God were limited by what we consider "*scientifically impossible*," we'd stuck a rather puny God, too.

On top of that, think what would become of Christmas itself! Never mind the virgin birth, what would happen to the incarnation? The Son of God becoming flesh and blood? The Son of God being born as a human baby? *Scientifically impossible – if God doesn't intervene directly in human affairs!* And what would happen to all the prophecies Jesus fulfilled? That He is the "**wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace**"? That He came to be "**wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities,**" so that by bearing the sins of the world, "**many would be made righteous**"? Also *scientifically impossible – if God doesn't intervene directly in human affairs!* For that matter, why would Jesus have come into this world at all? How could His death on the cross atone for our sins and forgive us if God doesn't intervene in human affairs? How could His resurrection even happen, much less assure us that because He lives, we will live also? Kind of makes you think, doesn't it?

So are miracles possible? Even one like the virgin birth? This *is* an important question, and there is a lot riding on the answer! So much, in fact, that when Mary asked, “**How can this be?**” I’m sure that is why Gabriel gave her this basic reminder: “**With God, nothing will be impossible!**” This reminder is meant for us, too. And think what it reminds us about God.

First and foremost, it reminds us that God is sovereign. No one is going to tell Him what He can or cannot do! No one is going to put Him in a box or tie His hands, either, much less limit Him to what they can understand! God created the universe and whatever “laws” govern it. God will decide how He will or will not operate. That includes working miracles if He chooses. Personally, I believe that far from there being no miracles, God works a lot more miracles than we realize! We just don’t pick up on them. But regardless, it’s up to God, isn’t it? He’ll decide what’s best for Him to do. He’ll decide whether He will work visibly or in disguise. Whatever suits His purpose! That’s the nice thing about being sovereign: “**With God, nothing will be impossible!**”

Closely related is the fact that God is involved in this universe He has made; involved in human affairs. So besides no one telling Him what He can or cannot do, no one is going to push Him out of the picture, either, or confine Him to the sidelines. God is involved! True, He may limit Himself. For instance, God has given us a free will, and He may choose not to over-ride it – even though He could. But limiting Himself doesn’t mean God isn’t involved! To the contrary! God is present everywhere, involved in every thing, every situation. And even if He doesn’t force us to do His will, He certainly works on us; He certainly works through situations. Sometimes He even works wondrously, in ways we have no reason to expect, which we then call miracles. But the point is: God is involved.

And isn’t this what we would expect of a God whose very nature is love? You can’t just love in theory. Love can’t just beget us, then forget us! A loving God has to be involved! And when a sovereign loving God gets involved, think what we can expect! Our prayers *will* be more than just cries out into the void. We can expect God to hear us and respond one way or another. Likewise, our faith will be more than just intellectual beliefs. We *can* turn to God for guidance, support, and strength! Our failures don’t have to be final. We can count on forgiveness. Our weaknesses don’t have to be fatal. We can count on transformation. And even death itself need not be the end for us. Here most of all, think what we can expect because our sovereign loving God gets involved! We can expect Him to turn death into the doorway to a new and better life – life with a God who not only wants to do what it takes to save us but is actually able to do it, because “**with God, nothing will be impossible!**”

And it’s important that we get this. You know, in the big picture, creating life in a virgin’s womb is a relatively small miracle. It just requires changing one cell. Asking God to cure a common cold affects more cells than that. Praying for Him to cure someone of cancer or addiction affects even more. So if a Christian can’t

believe He's capable of changing one cell, what does that imply about these other things? And what happens to our faith in the biggest miracle of all – our salvation! God loves us so much Jesus came in person to be our Savior! He loves us so much He was willing to live among us, die in our place, then rise again to guarantee us eternal life! And most amazing of all, God loves us so much that He saves us by grace alone – we don't have to earn it, just receive it as a gift! Yes, that's the biggest miracle. That's what should really make us ask, **"How can this be!"** That's the real proof that **"with God, nothing will be impossible."** The gift of our Savior! Talk about miraculous! So you see why this is important! So much is riding on the possibility of miracles! So much!

Speaking of which... As I think back to that little old lady who crossed her fingers during the creed, I can't help thinking of the other people in that group. There were a couple who did believe in the virgin birth but weren't so sure God still works miracles today. There were a few who did believe in miracles and would say they even experienced a few. I know there were also some great "prayer warriors" who counted on God to get directly involved in people's lives. And there was even one who believed so much in miracles she was a little bitter that God didn't always answer her prayers the way she thought He should. But regardless of their opinions then, you know what? All those folks have experienced a miracle now – God's biggest miracle, salvation. They are all gone, or rather, gone on to glory. And as they stand in the light of eternity, I'll bet they laugh at their former notions of what is or is not *"scientifically impossible."* Also at their blindness to many miracles God worked in their lives without them realizing it. As they stand in the light of eternity, they no longer question, **"How can this be?"** Now they know. They know, and even more, now they rejoice in having a God for whom nothing is impossible. For that's why they're in heaven, isn't it? They were saved by faith in a sovereign God who loved them enough to get involved – faith in a sovereign God for whom nothing is impossible!

That is our faith, too, and as we complete our preparations for Christmas, that's where we want to keep our focus. Sure, there may be times when we also struggle with the question of miracles. We may struggle with other questions, too – like why God does this or doesn't do that. Such struggling is not such a bad thing. Often, thinking things through leads to deeper understanding...and deeper faith. But where we want to focus most is on the God behind the Christmas miracle and the kind of God this miracle shows Him to be: a God for whom nothing is impossible, yet who humbled Himself so much in order to save us. Ah, baby Jesus! What a precious gift has been given us! What a splendid proof of God's love! And however much we may wonder **"How can this be?"** how blessed we are that it can be, that it is; that we have been given **"a Savior who is Christ the Lord."** Let Him be our focus – and the good news, that, miracle of miracles, we are loved, forgiven, and sure of eternal life because **"with" our "God nothing will be impossible"!** Amen.