

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2016

Text: Genesis 3:8–15; Isaiah 11:1–9; Daniel 2:31–45; Luke 1:26–38; 2:1–20

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There is a great deal of nostalgia attached to our Christmas celebrations. We have our secular Christmas traditions, stories, and songs: snowmen, various kinds of parties, Scrooge and humbug, mistletoe, trips to Grandmother's house, dreams of a white Christmas, and other kinds of joyous events. And then, we have our sacred traditions: manger scenes, Christmas trees, angelic visits, Joy to the World and Hallelujah Choruses, Christmas carols, the sharing of gifts in remembrance of Christ's birthday, candlelight services and so many other joyous and reverent observances.

Luke's gospel provides most of the details that inform our sacred traditions and even a few of our secular ones. It's a beautiful history – real history mind you – of how God's eternal Son took upon Himself our human nature so that He could redeem us from eternal despair and misery.

One of the features so prevalent in our modern Christmas celebrations is we're all so busy. That original Christmas season was a busy time for God's holy angels. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to Joseph. Gabriel preached a message of the impossible becoming possible. You, Virgin Mary, will give birth to an eternal Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Your Son, to be named Jesus, will reign over the house of Jacob and of His kingdom there will be no end. Mary believed the angel's message; Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. That was one of the greatest miracles of Christmas: Mary believed the impossible to be possible!

Lest Joseph, her godly betrothed, do the wrong thing with all the right intentions, an angel was sent to him. His message to Joseph: Mary, though a virgin, is pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. And you, Joseph, must raise Mary's divine Son, as your step-son. Fulfill that noble, God-given vocation. For starters, take Mary as your wife for she has been faithful to you and God. Name her Son, Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. That too was one of the greatest miracles of Christmas: Joseph believed the message of the impossible becoming possible. Sinners forgiven,

reconciled with God the Father unto eternal life; forlorn orphans, separated from the love of God are now exalted heirs of an eternal kingdom that will have no end.

And who could forget an angel suddenly visiting shepherds watching their sheep by night. He too preached a larger-than-life message, “Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is the Christ the Lord.” And then, as if on cue, the angelic choir sang the first Christmas carol, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” And we’ve been singing that impossible message made possible ever since. Peace, good will, joy, the birth of a universal Savior for all people. Christmas truly is a wondrous time. Can it get any better?

Actually, I think it can. There is much that is working powerfully in the background of the great Christmas events I’ve just described. The Old Testament readings for tonight provide a rich and glorious backdrop that illuminates the New Testament’s history of Jesus’ birth; they make these joyous events all the more glorious and wondrous.

It began all the way back in Genesis, at the dawn of time, in the hours following Adam and Eve’s original sin. The Lord Himself preached the first impossible now made possible message. The seed of the woman will destroy the devil, his works, and all his ways. The devil will mortally wound this promised Seed, but that Seed will prevail. The birth of Jesus is the fulfillment. Jesus is the seed of the woman, the Virgin Mary. He, and He alone, destroys the devils and His evil. On the cross of Calvary, Satan appeared to have won the day. But it was actually his undoing, the moment his head was crushed; he would not recover from that crushing blow. Proof of the Lord’s decisive victory was revealed on Easter morning when angels preached another impossible now made possible message. Jesus, the Seed of the Woman, rose from the dead never, never to die again. Sinners are reconciled to God the Father. And King Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity.

The backdrop of Jesus’ birth grows all the more glorious with Isaiah’s prophecy, spoken in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. A branch from the dead stump of Jesse’s house will grow and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesse was the father of King David. But by Isaiah’s time – some 300 years after King David – Jesse’s house was falling into ruins. The future for Judah’s Davidic dynasty looked grim indeed; it was like a tree cut to the ground. Nothing but a dead stump remained.

But then an unlooked for Branch grew from the deadness of Jesse's tree. Mary, an obscure descendant of Jesse's lineage, gave birth to an eternal King. Her womb was as good as dead. Though young, she had not had sexual relations with a man. She could not give birth to a Son. Until the impossible happened and she conceived. God's eternal Son took upon Himself the flesh and blood from David's stump and grew into the righteous Branch under whose shadow all believers find refuge, security, and deliverance from ignorance and death. Because of Jesus, the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra. Through the Lord Jesus Christ, harmony in this discordant world is restored. No longer shall there be death and suffering; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Two hundred years after Isaiah's message – in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. – another message of the impossible now made possible was proclaimed. This prophetic preview grounded the birth of Jesus in the course of human events orchestrated by the God of heaven and earth. The prophet Daniel interpreted king Nebuchadnezzar's mysterious dream about a mighty, frightening image of exceeding brightness. Daniel saw an image of a man; the head was of fine gold, the chest and arms of silver, the hips and thighs were of bronze, the lower legs were of iron, the feet were a mixture of iron and clay. The statue represents four different historic kingdoms: the gold the Babylonian, the silver the Persian, the bronze the Greek, and iron with clay the Roman.

But then the dream revealed the impossible: a stone not cut by human hands struck the feet of iron and clay and the entire statue fell and become nothing more than worthless chaff driven by the wind. During the fourth kingdom – the mighty Roman Empire – the divine stone was cut without human hands. In the womb of a Virgin Maiden, the Lord Jesus was conceived, not by human efforts, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. In those days of the Roman Empire, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. In the manger of Bethlehem, the Stone began to grow. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., the power and might of the Roman Empire could not destroy this Stone even though a Roman governor, Pontus Pilate, sentenced Jesus to death.

In the third decade of that 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Stone rose from the dead never to taste death again. Through Christmas and Easter preaching, the mountainous Stone filled the entire earth. Under the unstoppable, grinding force of this Mountain, Babylon, Persian, Greece, and Rome are pulverized into chaff blown in the wind. Of Christ's

kingdom, there will be no end as the angels preached to Joseph, Mary, and shepherds. And the citizens of this eternal kingdom are born again unto an eternal, living hope through the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The great God of heaven and earth has revealed unto us through His holy prophets and apostles these great and wondrous things. The impossible is now possible. Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men. This interpretation of human and divine history is sure and certain.

On this wondrous night, all our secular and sacred traditions find voice and occasion for great joy. What stands behind them all is the universal hope of all mankind expressed since the beginning of time. The Seed of the Woman promised to Adam, Eve, and all their sin-infected children, has been born. That righteous Branch from the stump of Jesse lives and reigns to all eternity. When He comes again on the Last Day, we and all of God's redeemed children, will experience the fullness of His eternal kingdom of joy, peace, and undying life. For the knowledge of the Lord will fill the heavens and the earth as water fill the sea.

The divine Stone born without the help of human initiative was conceived in the womb of a virgin Maiden. In the days of the Roman Caesar Augustus, the Stone was born in Bethlehem for He was of Jesse's house, the royalty of King David. Shepherds worshipped the Christ Child, as we do this day. For He is your Savior. Satan is defeated. God's eternal kingdom is established and fills all the heavens and the earth. All earthly kingdoms, with all their flighty power and majesty, pass away like chaff in the wind.

Yes! What joy and wonder we celebrate this night. The impossible is now made possible. And by the grace of the King born of Mary in Bethlehem, the Christmas miracle continues. We believe that the impossible is possible. The Seed of the Woman, David's righteous Branch, the Stone cut without human hands, the Son of God and Mary, the King of angels and men, the joy of all the earth, our Savior and God of eternal love, Jesus is born. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward you all! A very Merry and Blessed Christmas!!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.