



THE UNITING  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH  
IN SOUTHERN  
AFRICA

Wednesday, December 23, 2020

Dear Friends

I was re reading my letter to the UPCSA last year and was reflecting on the fact that so much of what happened in 2020 caught us totally by surprise. As Chuck Swindoll says, "Surprises come in many forms and guises: some good, some borderline amazing, some awful, some tragic, some hilarious. But there's one thing we can usually say -- surprises aren't boring." In early December 2019, one could not have predicted what 2020 would bring to us and the kind of challenges we would be required to face during the course of the year. And whatever 2020 was, it has certainly never been boring.

I write this to you on the last week of Advent, a week in which we think about Mary, the mother of Jesus. I thought I would focus on her as we have just come through the 16 Days of Activism and the plight of women and children is fresh in our minds. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, let us spare some thought for this brave young woman who said "Yes" to God. Consider the impossibilities that were part of this story as Dwight Gunter, points out in his book, The Possible Impossible: "This 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? What would you label "impossible" in your life? Peace in our world. Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Christian values returning to our nation, morality becoming the norm? Impossible! Restoring relationships, healing past hurts in our lives. A relative or friend entering a relationship with Christ. Breaking an addiction and overcoming past hurts and disappointments? Impossible!" And we might add, returning to a life that looks something like normal after this Corona virus affected year? Impossible! Our church reaching our surrounding community and transforming our world completely? Impossible! We are in a similar position to Mary, wondering whether this is possible or not. Perhaps we even ask the same question she asked, "How will this be?" (v. 34). The real question for people today is "How can the impossible become possible?"

In the first place, it seemed impossible to Mary to discover that she had been preferred - favoured - by God. For us the word, 'prefer' implies comparison; it means to like one thing more than another, but the older meaning of the word means "to favour something": it is meant positively. Mary was preferred because God favoured and chose her to be the one who would bear the Messiah - what a privilege. You might think it impossible to learn today that we are recipients of God's favour too, not because of our status or our money, or our power or anything else, but because of God's love and grace.

The second impossible for Mary, and this was a big one, was that she was pregnant. Especially it was impossible since she had never had a sexual relationship with a man and so, quite rightly did not suspect that she would be pregnant. Mary was pregnant, and the good news today is that you are pregnant too: pregnant with the purposes of God, pregnant and filled with potential to do amazing things in God's name if you will just believe it.

The third thing that was impossible for Mary to believe was that this child was the child of the promise –

the Messiah who would sit on David's throne and liberate the people from domination. God was going to fulfill his promise of saving the world through this humble teenager. It might seem impossible for you to discover that God wants to fulfill his promises to a broken and hurting world through you also, but it is true.

The fourth thing that seemed impossible was that this would all be accomplished not by any human agency but by the power of God. 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 grace at work in and through our humanity, God's miraculous unmerited love in evidence around us. God's Son born to bring us Second Birth while we labor under the assumption that we have to do it all ourselves.

William Barclay once said that the world's most popular prayer is, "Thy will be changed." But the world's greatest prayer is, "Thy will be done." Mary prayed the latter.

Friends, Christmas is a reminder that impossible can become possible when the power of God encounters a willing human being. Let's be willing to be used by God for God's purposes and God's glory.

Finally friends, in the midst of the second wave of the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen this disease take a terrible toll on our ministers and members. A number of our ministers have succumbed to this disease and many families have been touched by the tentacles of this global pandemic. Recently, the Rev Melanie Cook suggested that I call the UPCSAs to a Day of Prayer and Fasting and I thought a spectacularly good idea. Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> January is the Sunday on which we remember the Baptism of Jesus. Accordingly, I am calling the denomination to prayer and fast on **Monday 11<sup>th</sup> January** for an end to the Corona virus pandemic particularly in the countries in which the UPCSAs have a presence: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. In my New Year letter early in January I will give you some suggestions about how to conduct such a fast, but for now please just mark the day and pass it on to your congregations.

As I write to you, I have just received the news that Gladwin Phenya has died. I was fortunate to visit him and Mama Phenya when we were in Port Elizabeth, preparing for the Executive Commission and the celebration of the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the UPCSAs. Please take a moment to give thanks for his life and ministry and all those who have gone to be with the Lord. Pray for their families and friends and loved ones who have gone to be with the Lord.

God's richest blessings for this Advent and Christmas Seasons. May the Christ child bring you hope, peace, joy, and love.

Your partner in the gospel

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Peter', with a large, stylized flourish extending from the bottom right.

Peter