THE GOD OF IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITIES
Acts 2:1-24

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Text: “But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.” (Vs. 24)

I

“It will never happen! It’s impossible! They will never lay the first brick or enroll the first student.” Those were the comments of some United Methodists when the General Conference of The United Methodist Church voted in 1988 to begin a university on the continent of Africa.

“Never happen! Impossible! Not a single brick! Not a single student.” Today, just over 20 years later, Africa University in Old Mutare, Zimbabwe is a school of 1200 students from 22 African countries. It has 27 debt-free buildings, 3 more under construction, a balanced budget, a clean audit, and more than 2700 graduates, holding degrees in Theology, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Education, Management and Administration, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health Sciences, and Peace, Leadership and Governance.

“It will never happen. It’s impossible. They will never lay the first brick or enroll the first student,” some said. But those voices didn’t count on the one thing that mattered. They didn’t count on the fact that the inspiration and driving force behind the creation of Africa University is the church’s belief in the God of Impossible Possibilities!

II

That’s the faith that got the Christian church started in the first place. That’s the Easter faith we heard preached in the scripture passage we just read – from Peter’s sermon in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Jews from all over that ancient world had traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, one of the major celebrations of the Jewish year. Peter was there, and he preached to the gathered crowd. He told the story of Jesus, “a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs from God.” He reminded them of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. Then he made an astounding affirmation. Peter said: “But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.” And in that faith the church was born!

Death! Everybody knew death was final. Everybody knew that victory over death was impossible! But Peter preached what he and the disciples had already experienced: the
resurrection of Christ. He preached that the impossible, victory over death, had actually become possible and real. What was not possible, he said, was that death would hold their Lord in its power. It’s the Easter message. It’s the affirmation on which the church was established. It’s the faith we celebrate every time we worship on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. It’s the faith of life’s triumph over death, hope’s victory over despair, resurrection’s power over the forces of evil and destruction. It’s the faith that is the inspiration and driving force of our life and mission as Christians: This God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the God of Impossible Possibilities!

III

Which brings us back to Africa University. This school is a shining example of the power of the God of Impossible Possibilities.

Remember, I said it was begun with a vote of the General Conference of our church in 1988. But it really began almost a century earlier. It began as a dream!

In 1898 an American missionary bishop named Joseph Crane Hartzell presided over the mission work of The Methodist Church in what was then known as Rhodesia, today known by its African name of Zimbabwe. One day Hartzell stood at the top of Mount Chiremba, a mountain above the town of Old Mutare in Rhodesia, and as he stood there he envisioned hundreds of African school children in the valley below, running to school, their arms laden with books. He shared his dream with his friend, British industrialist and colonizer, Cecil Rhodes, from whom Rhodesia got its name. Rhodes had been given a huge tract of land by an African chief in exchange for the promise of schools and education. Rhodes granted to Bishop Hartzell several thousand acres at the foot of Mount Chiremba, and Hartzell started a school there. Later a hospital, an orphanage, and a farm were established on the land, and in the early 1900’s the Old Mutare Mission became one of the first organized mission stations of The Methodist Church in Rhodesia. That mission still operates today, with a primary school, a high school, the farm, the hospital, the orphanage, and a church.

In 1984, three-quarters of a century later, two African United Methodist bishops, Emilio J. M. de Carvalho of Angola and Arthur Kulah of Liberia, with the support of thousands of African United Methodists, challenged The United Methodist Church to establish a university in Africa. Our church had been in the business of primary and secondary schools all over southern Africa for years, but we had not built a university there. The challenge went to the General Conference in 1988, and the establishment of a university on the continent of Africa was approved. The Zimbabwe Annual Conference, which by then was the owner of the land on which the Old Mutare Mission sat, volunteered to donate some 1400 acres as the site of the university. Committees of our church then went to work on feasibility studies, fund-raising, and preparation, working with officials in
Zimbabwe to gain the necessary approval and charter from the government. An international board of directors was selected, initial faculty and leadership were recruited, and plans were made for the opening.

“It will never happen. They will never lay a single brick, never enroll a single student,” said some. But Africa University opened in the fall of 1992 with 40 students, living and going to classes in renovated farm buildings. Initial courses were offered in Theology and in Agriculture and Natural Resources. Since then, in just 17 years, enrollment has grown to 1200 students, from 22 African countries, with over 2700 graduates, 27 modern, debt-free buildings, and 7 academic areas of study.

Beyond these facts, however, we get to the real power and influence of this university – in some stories of changed lives and ministry for change throughout the continent of Africa.

One of my favorites comes from an early graduating class. Do you remember Rwanda 12-15 years ago? Civil war between the Hutu and the Tutsi tribes? Well, two young men from Rwanda, one a Hutu, the other a Tutsi, were enrolled at Africa University. Back home their families were trying to kill each other, but when they got to Africa University (just so you will know that God sometimes has a strange sense of humor), they were roommates. When they were graduating four years later they were asked: “What are you going to do now that you are about to graduate?” They responded: “We are going to go back home and tell our families that we can live together.” And now, a decade-and-a-half later, Africa University has an academic program in Peace, Leadership, and Governance, teaching students how to work in their governments to provide leadership in peacemaking and good governance.

Or, there is the young woman from Zimbabwe who graduated from Africa University a few years ago, stayed on to teach in the Institute of Peace, Leadership, and Governance, and is now in the United States working on a Ph. D. at George Mason University. Her dissertation will explore the current unity government in Zimbabwe, and after receiving her degree she plans to return to the faculty at Africa University to continue her teaching. In the meantime, she is helping to send her younger sister to school at Africa University.

Or, there is the young man who graduated a few years ago and has been working in the Sudan to help Sudanese refugees gain access to clean water. He said of his work: “My biggest achievement to date has been helping over 200,000 people in Western Darfur gain access to potable water, latrines and medicine in the face of water shortages and water-related diseases.”

Or, there is the Humanities and Social Sciences graduate who is now the program officer with the National AIDS Council of Mozambique, responsible for educational programs for infection prevention for young adults.
Or, there is the Management and Administration graduate who is a training consultant for a major bank in Uganda, and the former chief commercial manager for Uganda Television.

Or, there is the theology graduate in Malawi who, in the 12 years since he completed his degree, has been instrumental in establishing 26 new churches in rural Malaw. Now a missionary superintendent in the Malawi conference, his work focuses on health, leadership development, food security, stewardship, church planting, and education. He says of his work: “It’s a great challenge. I cover the whole country in terms of ministry….The biggest contribution that Africa University has made to my capacity as a pastor is in church-leadership training. Africa University enabled me to work very effectively and to make a solid contribution in my church and country.”

And stories like these can be told over and over again!

The scripture lesson we read earlier included the story of the first Christian Pentecost, when those persons present from all over the known world heard the Christian message in their own native languages. I experienced that once in the chapel at Africa University. The chapel was filled with students for the regular mid-week worship service. I had the privilege of preaching, and I asked the congregation to pray the Lord’s Prayer in unison, but to use their own native languages in doing so. Remember, there are students from over 20 African nations there. Though the official language of the university is English, students come from countries whose primary language is English, or French, or Portuguese. In addition, they come from a wide array of tribal languages. The average student at Africa University speaks four different languages. We prayed The Lord’s Prayer together – in more languages than I could recognize. But, as on that Pentecost Day in Jerusalem, each one understood in his or her own native language. The Holy Spirit was present, and barriers were transcended. It was as close to Pentecost as I ever expect or hope to be!

There is a Nigerian proverb that says, “The pillar of the world is hope.” In educating students for leadership in this Christian context, Africa University is providing hope for a new generation of African leaders. And when you think that the Christian church is growing more quickly on the continent of Africa than anywhere else in the world, the importance of this effort becomes quickly visible.

IV

So – how has it happened? How has this impossible possibility come to be?

Well, there are apportionment dollars. Churches like this one, all over The United States, support Africa University through the Africa University apportionment line, which goes
to basic operations of the school. Every time you put a gift in your offering plate, you are supporting Africa University! And I thank you for that ongoing commitment to this school!

There are special gifts – from individuals, congregations, annual conferences – which have built dormitories and classrooms, and endowed scholarships and academic chairs. The generosity of United Methodists from this country and beyond has made possible a debt-free campus and an endowment of some $40 million. Today the greatest need is for scholarship support. Many of the students come to the university with little or no resources to support their education. In my retirement I am working with individuals, congregations, and annual conferences to raise money for scholarships.

It costs $5,400 a year to send a student to Africa University. Is there a Sunday school class or a UMW group or some other group or individual in this congregation who will send a student to school for a year?

$125,000 will endow a scholarship and send a student to Africa University each year from now on. Are there persons in this congregation who will undertake a project to raise the money to endow a scholarship?

But, I am often asked, “What about the university’s financial status and well-being in the current Zimbabwean economy? Just a few months ago inflation there was 12 hundred million percent! We cannot even imagine that! But today, since Zimbabwe changed from its own currency to US dollars, inflation has dropped to less than 3 percent.

Miraculously (and that is the only way I know to describe it), Africa University has remained remarkably stable in what has been the world’s worst economy. The endowment corpus is held in Nashville by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Prudent management has resulted in Africa University being the only institution of higher education in Zimbabwe that has remained open consistently through the country’s economic woes. And there are signs that the new unity government and new approaches to the nation’s financial challenges are beginning to bear fruit. It will take a while, but there is great confidence among many people in Africa and beyond that Zimbabwe’s economy will recover. Just this week, for the first time in 10 years, the International Monetary Fund has announced a loan to the Zimbabwean government - $500 million.

Zimbabwe was, just a few short years ago, the breadbasket of sub-Saharan Africa, and I believe it will be again. When that happens, young people educated at Africa University will be prepared to accept roles of leadership in Zimbabwe and beyond. Education has been called the gift of hope. And, as the African proverb says, “The pillar of the world is hope.”
Do you remember the crazy old knight, Don Quixote in “The Man of La Mancha?” He sang:

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go;

To right the unrightable wrong,
To love pure and chaste from afar,
To try when your arms are too weary,
To reach the unreachable star;

His song touched our hearts, and I believe I know why for us Christians. I believe it was because you and I, as followers of the Risen Christ, know that we serve the God of Impossible Possibilities. This is God who restores broken relationships, offers second chances, brings hope when there seems to be only hopelessness, gives life when there appears to be only death. This is God who causes old men (and women) to dream dreams and young men (and women) to see visions, then blesses them with the courage, insight, strength, and persistence to keep pursuing the dreams and visions until they become reality. This is God who has made life new for many of you and who is making life new for students at Africa University. This is God who called the church into being with the faith that it was not possible for Christ to be held in the power of death. This is God who continues to inspire us to serve and give beyond what the world tells us is possible. This is God who keeps on making the impossible possible. This is the God of Impossible Possibilities.

Thanks be to God!