

We Believe and Trust

Advent Midweek #4 – 12/21/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Luke 1:13-20, 30-35 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 18, [Zechariah responds to the angel's news,] “**How shall I know this...?”**

v.34, [Mary responds to the angel's news,] “**How will this be...?”**

Introduction

✘ Two families of God help us prepare the way of the Lord this evening. One family is a husband and wife from the hill country of Judea, near Jerusalem; members of the priest class. Pious and godly, they walk in God's ways. Elderly and living alone, they have no children.

→ One day the husband, Zechariah, went to the temple for his work assignment. It fell to his lot to enter the temple and burn incense at the golden altar of incense for one week. Only once in a priest's life did he receive this honor.

✘ In the temple, the angel Gabriel suddenly stood beside him and said, “Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ... Many will rejoice at his birth ... and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit ... and he will go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah ... to make ready ... a people prepared” (Lk. 1:13-17).

→ Zechariah's response was this, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years”.

→ And how did the angel respond? He simply said in verse 20 of our Gospel Reading, “You will be silent and unable to speak ... because you did not believe my words”. And so, when Zechariah came out to give the blessing to the people he could not speak. He signaled to the people and they understood that he had received a vision from God.

✘ Three months later in Nazareth in Galilee the same angel Gabriel spoke to a young girl, engaged to marry a local carpenter. Like the other couple, both Mary and Joseph were believers in God, pious and good people. The angel told Mary that she would have a child, whom they were to name Jesus. “He will be great and will be ... the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of ... David” (Lk. 1:32).

→ Mary's response was this, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (v.34)

→ And how did the angel respond this time? He said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child ... will be ... holy – the Son of God” (v.35). The angel also told Mary that her aged cousin Elizabeth was with child, “she who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God” (vv. 36-37).

I. These families help us *Prepare the Way*

✘ The example and work of these two families are given to us here in Scripture, in part, to encourage us toward belief and trust as we *Prepare the Way* of the Lord in our own lives.

✘ No doubt Elizabeth prayed often. In Hebron, near where she and Zechariah lived, their ancestors Jacob and Leah were buried. She heard about Jacob's first love, Rachel, who died on the way to Bethlehem giving birth to Benjamin. She remembered Rachel's complaint to Jacob in Genesis 30:1, “Give me children, or I shall die!”, and his answer, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld (children) from you?” (v.2)

→ Zechariah knew that his ancestors Abraham and Sarah, buried in Hebron, were childless for many years and that Abraham had prayed in Genesis 15:2, “O Lord Yahweh, what will You give me, for I continue childless?” There were many; many who were denied such gifts of the Lord.

- ✘ On the other hand, Joseph and Mary were engaged but kept themselves pure. Mary could not understand how she could possibly have a child. When Joseph later learned she was with child, he was initially upset.
- ✘ These two responses focus on two attitudes: belief and trust, both of which are important for God's people who are preparing the way, even today in the season of Advent.
- ✘ Let's first consider Zechariah's question: "How shall I know this?" In other words he is asking – some might say even demanding – that God give him a sign that this will happen? When God promised a child to Abraham, Abraham laughed (Gen. 17:17). So did Sarah, even though she denied it later (Gen. 18:12-15). Later, the time came for God to test Abraham's faith. God told him in verse two of our Old Testament Reading, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to ... Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering."
 - ➔ Abraham believed and trusted God, who said that out of Abraham's seed, by Sarah, God would bless all nations. Hebrews 11:19 tells us, "He considered that God was able even to raise (his son) from the dead". Our Epistle Reading tonight from James, chapter two says that Abraham showed his faith by his works. His immediate trust was a display of his deeper faith.
 - ➔ Zechariah believed but still wanted some signal before he could trust. And he got a sign in his inability to communicate until the child was born.
- ✘ Now consider Mary: Her child, to be named "Jesus," as both she and Joseph were told (Matt. 1:21), was born, fulfilling God's promise and God's plan. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners". Did you notice that Mary asked for no sign, yet she was given one: "Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son" (Lk. 1:36)?
- ✘ So we have important differences in these two responses. Zechariah said he would not trust until he could be sure. Mary said that she did not understand how this could happen but quickly said in Luke 1:38, "let it be to me according to your word".
 - ➔ Now, do not misunderstand me here: Zechariah was no unbeliever. We see that at John's birth when no better praise and blessing could be spoken than that of Zechariah. As soon as he could speak again, the first words out of his mouth were his famous song that begins this way: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant..." (Lk. 1:68-72).
 - ➔ Zechariah's attitude is now like that of his son, John, who said in Luke 3:16, "...He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie".

II. Our Reactions to their Responses

- ✘ So, how do you and I respond to Zechariah's and Mary's responses? There are two very important interconnected responses: Belief and Trust.
- ✘ Belief is centered in confidence; the attitude of accepting something with little or no hard evidence – often even against all of the evidence. After His resurrection Jesus said in John 20:29, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed". Hebrews 11:1 tells us that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen".
 - ➔ A similar desire for a child happened in the time of the Judges. An angel appeared to a man named Manoah and his wife, saying that she would bear a child. Judges 13:12 tells us, "Manoah said, 'Now when your words come true, what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission?'"

→ Notice Manoah did not say, “If” your words come true, or “Show me how” they will come true, but “when your words come true...”. That’s confidence – faith that trusts; belief that not only says God answers prayer but is ready to speak of God’s promises as if they are already fulfilled even before they actually come to be.

→ 1 John 5:14 says, “This is the confidence that we have toward [God], that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us”. And Ephesians 3:12, “We have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in [Christ]”.

✘ The second attitude, Trust adds actions to our belief. Mark 9:14-29 has a poignant story that happened right after Jesus’ Transfiguration. A father who before had asked the disciples to heal his demon-possessed boy – but they failed – brought him to Jesus. The father asked for His help saying, “If you can do anything”. “If you can!,” Jesus replied, “All things are possible for one who believes”. And “Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mk. 9:22-24)

→ The New English Bible puts it this way, “I have faith ... help me where faith falls short”.

Conclusion

✘ Whether Zechariah’s faith fell short or not, he certainly still believed. But it seems he was not ready to trust. The word Gabriel brought to him made no sense, because after all he and his wife were old. There are some things we just can’t know or don’t need to know, yet God simply intends for us to believe.

→ Mary believed and trusted. You see, faith itself is a miracle that accepts God’s Word in trust and then goes on to respond with an appropriate action.

✘ The author of the book of Hebrews tells the Christians of his day as well as you and me today in Hebrews 10:35, 37-38, “Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ...For, yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith”.

→ Just as they looked forward with eagerness to the coming of Jesus who made them righteous when He came in human flesh, suffered and died for their salvation and rose in victory over all, so you and I are made righteous by Jesus alone. And as His “righteous ones” we look to His coming now in full belief and complete trust, knowing as Mary did that because He has promised it is happening, even now before we see it completed.

→ “Come quickly Lord Jesus!” To You be all the glory. Amen.