

Second Sunday of Advent – Belief or Unbelief - Luke 1;68-79
December 9, 2018

Please pray with me. Creator God, we pray this day for peace in our hearts, peace in our souls, that we might walk more closely with you and that we might better understand your Word as we listen to Luke and follow Zechariah in his journey of unbelief. Amen.

What our scripture passage doesn't tell us this week is the story of Zechariah not believing the angel Gabriel. We remember Luke tells us in chapter one that the Lord sent the angel Gabriel to Zechariah (verse 12) and he later sent Gabriel to Mary (verse 26) with essentially the same message. There are a series of parallels between the Angel Gabriel's visit to Zechariah and his visit to Mary, all of which allude to an important aspect of faith.

Both are "troubled" when the angel Gabriel approaches them, and Gabriel reassures both, saying, "Do not be afraid". Both are given the name of the coming child "John/Jesus". Gabriel says of both children, "he will be great". These sons will be the two greatest people to ever walk the face of the earth. The work of the Holy Spirit is referenced in both visits and both Zechariah and Mary respond with a question.

We notice that there is just a subtle difference between the way in which Zechariah and Mary phrase their questions. Zechariah's question could be quite literally (if awkwardly) translated as "According to what will I know this?" He actually said, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years. However, Mary's question focuses not on how she will know,

but simply on how this mysterious birth will come about: “How will this be since I am a virgin?”

We hear a little hint of doubt in Zechariah’s question: how can I know this or how can I be certain? But for Mary, it’s not so much a matter of how can I know—it’s more “I know this is true because I place my trust in God, but I can’t imagine how it will happen.” The angel clarifies the contrast we are drawing, by responding to Zechariah this way: “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe” Elizabeth, on the other hand, proclaims Mary’s faith: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord”.

Zechariah doesn’t go into his Canticle as directly as Mary does. And this is part of a larger portrayal of Mary in these early chapters as the model disciple—one who hears the word of God and acts on it. Zechariah’s unbelief results in him being unable to speak; only after John is born and Zechariah confirms the name given by the angel, John, is Zechariah’s tongue loosed, giving rise to his great Canticle, the Benedictus. Mary, on the other hand, is unwavering in faith from the beginning, saying: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” and she moves straight into her Magnificat, immediately after she has visited Elizabeth.

It is interesting that Zechariah doesn’t really believe that he and Elizabeth will have a son and it doesn’t seem to me that he poses his question much differently from Mary, but apparently his unbelief is obvious to the angel Gabriel. I also find it interesting that Elizabeth proclaims Mary’s faith when Mary visits her

and we have to wonder how poor Zechariah would feel if he could have heard Elizabeth proclaim, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Now, Zechariah is a priest, he has been a priest for many years and his faith should have been rock solid. Mary is but a poor teen-age girl whose unwed pregnancy will be an embarrassment to her, her family and might likely threaten her engagement to Joseph, but she has faith that the Lord will take care of her.

Through these two contrasts, Luke teaches us that God doesn't bless people according to their age, sex, or station in life. He blesses them according to his own good purposes. Grace is free and God has chosen to pour it out abundantly across the spectrum of humanity. Faith is the right and pleasing response to God's promises. And, as with grace, it isn't reserved for the spiritual elite. Young women can (and often do) surpass old men in trusting God.

But you see, in those days prior to the birth of Christ, things were very predictable in that area of the world. Sure, the temple was being upgraded, but daily worship and ritual were not interrupted. Twenty-four divisions of priests rotated on a regular basis, much like the royal palace guards in Britain today. What happened each day was expected to happen. But then, the unimaginable happened. An unexpected event occurred that disrupted the well-ordered world of one priest and his wife – Zechariah and Elizabeth and this led to a series of unexpected events that would eventually disrupt our world too.

Zechariah and his wife suffered unfulfilled longings. Though they were faithful servants of God, they had to endure the pain and disgrace of childlessness.

But Zechariah didn't let his disappointments keep him from service. He did not get distracted from his duties to the Lord and to his community. And then an angel appeared and promised his heart's desire. God would override nature (as he had with Abraham and Sarah before) to prove His faithfulness. Elizabeth, a senior citizen, would bear a child. Their years of waiting and watching and hoping and praying would find their fulfillment in the birth of a son, a very special son.

I am pretty sure that none of us are going to be in Zechariah's shoes, but I am also sure there are plenty of times when we have similar situations where we don't listen to God or don't believe God is working in our best interests. As a chaplain at Maine Med I served several families who either had a child born dead, a late term miscarriage, or a baby who was born with severe problems and died within days after birth. These families, even the ones with a strong faith, struggled to see why God would do this to them. What was God's reasoning? How would they go on? And I can tell you that saying, "God had his reasons," or "God needed another little angel in heaven" was definitely not the correct response to these questions. Sometimes a hug and simple silence was the best answer.

As we struggle with our own unfulfilled yearnings and unmet needs, may we remember that the events of so long-ago echo in our lives today. We still long for fulfillment; we still desire someone who will meet our needs. In Zechariah's and Elizabeth's blessing of their son John, the herald of the One to come, we see the answer to our own struggles. God will provide. God will send His Son. Amen.

