

Be Not Afraid!

December 18, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song

Luke 1:46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." 56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Sermon

In Luke's introductory chapter to his Gospel, which spans 80 verses, the phrase, "Do Not Be Afraid!" appears twice. Both times, the phrase is uttered by the angel Gabriel to announce Gabriel's presence to two different individuals prior to passing along the message of what I like to call, "inconceivable conceptions."

Luke actually begins his gospel explaining his rather modest task of "compiling an orderly account" based upon his research into "everything from the beginning."

He's doing all this for someone he calls, "His Excellency Theopholis," in order that Mr. T will be able to "realize the reliability" of all that he was told regarding God's plan for saving the world.

But curiously, Luke does not start with the actual birth of Jesus. Instead, he uses all 80 verses of chapter 1 to set up the context of Jesus' birth. And I must say, it's a pretty good story that I would encourage you to read again prior to Jesus' birth, come Christmas Eve.

But for now, allow me to summarize it for you.

In addition to the angelic visitations, we are introduced to five other prominent characters, two miraculous conceptions, and the birth and the circumcision baby boy named John.

For you see, the birth of Jesus was so consequential for Luke, that he needed to set it into context and build up a bit of anticipatory drama before actually bringing Jesus on the scene. After all, the birth of anyone consequential in the ancient world had to include numerous preliminary miraculous signs and wonders!

And since the birth of this savior had been foretold for millennia prior, you can't just jump right into, "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set God's People free!"

Our first two characters were powerful men in that space and time. Herod the Great, a client "king" of Rome was likely used by Luke to give his story legitimacy by placing it into historical context. The Herod, who later executes the baby boy who became John the Baptist, would have actually been this Herod's son, Herod Antipas. In either case, both Herods were ruthless, conniving, oppressive rulers who managed to impoverish their people as they kowtowed to their benefactors in Rome.

Zechariah was of course not nearly as powerful, but he would have been a member of the high priestly cast who honorably performed his duties at the Temple in Jerusalem. But not all was well in the Zechariah household, since we are quickly informed that they were childless due to his wife's barrenness.

This would have been a source of great shame for both Elizabeth and Zachariah. But what I want to know, given the lack of scientific medical knowledge available at that time, is how they would have known that it was in fact Elizabeth and not Zach who was infertile? Hmm . . . what do you think?

The most obvious reason of course, considering that most of the biblical text was written by men... blaming women would have been simple male logic, a "no brainer" for those with small brains to conclude?

But her miraculous conception also places Lizzy within a long line of incredibly faithful women such as Sarah, Rachel, and Hanna who also miraculously conceived and gave birth to children who then went on to radically change Biblical history.

But what happens next is what truly makes this story unique. Men actually shut up for a change! Now most of us know that how a story is constructed or "told," can tell us as much, maybe even more, about the story's point, than the actual word choices that are used.

Who gets to speak, who's voice is heard and who needs to listen, are just as important as what is actually said. In our case in Luke 1, the story opens with the introduction of a man named Zechariah, a Temple priest in Jerusalem.

The first voice that we "hear" is that of the angel, Gabriel, announcing to Zechariah the miraculous conception of his son. Zach's response however is bumbling disbelief, which results in Gabriel literally removing his voice, and thus, literarily, no male will be heard from for the next 46 verses – that is more than half of Luke's introduction!

And in the cosmic drama of God's plan, Elizabeth and Mary are two of the most unlikely characters to bring about God's salvation of the world! Why? Because they were women and thus, among the weakest and most oppressed people in their society.

Call it crazy but God chose a barren woman well past menopause and young, unmarried girl - those most bereft of any power - to full fill the greatest mission of all. And they were not merely pliant, empty vessels, but strong and assertive women.

You'd think that a big-time Temple priest would have lots of good words, maybe even the "best" words, but Zach's response was pathetic! Elizabeth, on the other hand quickly takes over in a most confident voice of resounding thanksgiving and praise to the Almighty God who has now finally given her great joy.

And then Gabriel again appears, this time announcing to Mary that she too will miraculously conceive and give birth. Similar to Zach, Mary too has some serious questions and concerns, which she thoughtfully expresses and which Gabe takes seriously.

But in the end, she boldly proclaims her willingness to jump into God's salvific drama using similar terms that a priest serving at the Temple might use.

*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word."*

As she breaks forth in magnificent song to which John dances to, in utero.

*"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."*

The scene then quickly changes from the private space of women to the public male-centric Temple for the circumcision and the naming of Elizabeth's baby. Elizabeth startles the crowd by unilaterally declaring that the baby's name will be John. Perhaps not clearly hearing her departure from established orthodoxy, or perhaps because they did clearly hear her voice, the crowd quickly needs to solicit the father's opinion as to why the baby should not be named Zach Junior?

And as soon as daddy scribbles out his agreement, once he follows through with her intent, voila, his voice returns.

But no longer speechless, he suddenly can't seem to shut up! And for some odd reason, Luke gives him a 10-verse song of his own to recite, giving the male voice the final say of chapter 1. A song which, I might add, is a much weaker version of what he seemed to plagiarize from Mary. Perhaps after 9 months and 8 days of not being able to utter a single word, he just can't help himself?

Or perhaps Luke decided that by using Zach as one of his first characters, giving him the last word, would make him a convenient set of "book ends" for the story. Or perhaps Luke, or a later editor, decided we need to balance this story up a bit so that half of the world's population doesn't get too carried away with their renewed voice?

Sadly, in the end, it's as they say, a pretty weak tea, and you could add that Luke's story needs Zach's song about as much as a fish needs a bicycle!

But what really propels the story forward, are the actions and voices of women! As movers and shakers of the story, Lizzie and Mary not only evoke some very powerful historical stories about other unconventional and courageous women, they also inspire all of us who seek to follow in their footsteps. Actually, one of the reasons I feel the Bible has some Divine inspiration is because their stories have managed to get included!

So, what is the point of the story? Well, just as there are two babies to be born from two very “Inconceivable Conceptions,” I believe there are actually two main points in this story!

The first point is that God is Emmanuel, the Divine creator is with us, who will save us and rescue and restore all of creation, and comes to our aid even in our darkest hour.

The second point is that God will accomplish this not only by working with us, but in ways that are completely upside down and opposite of how we silly humans have been trying to save ourselves since leaving that Garden God had created for us.

But with all due respect to Crosby, Stills and Nash (was Young with them at that time?), our purpose is NOT “...to get ourselves back to the Garden,” but to restore God’s original plan by co-creating a new heaven and a new earth.

Talk about a restoration project! And restoration, you will recall is our theme for this Advent season.

God comes as a defenseless baby swaddled in strips of old clothes, not in a nearby hospital or even in a cozy home. The Messiah came homeless, poor, and susceptible to every bug and bacteria that might be lingering in a dirty old cow shed.

He was not born a King like the divine Caesars of Rome, nor let alone a pathetic client king like that ruthless Herod. He had no armies at his command to enforce his will. He didn’t have tons of cash on hand so he could buy up every news outlet and social media platform so that he could flood the world with his propaganda.

And since women hold up half the sky, as the African saying goes, God also isn’t relying on just men to be in charge! Which is really smart move I must confess.

Let us not forget that for umpteen generations, prior to Luke putting pen to paper, men and women, young and old, kings and peasant alike, had waited and struggled to be ready for that moment. And finally, God acts — God kicks this restoration plan into high gear by asking women to get it started!

And it is Mary who sings out prior to that great happening what the rest of Luke’s story will try to explain that, “*The arm of God has performed mighty deeds!*” And it is God who puts to rout those who think far too highly of themselves. For it is God who brings down rulers from their thrones while simultaneously lifting up the poor and humble. It is God who fills the hungry with good food and the poor with all that they need while simultaneously sending the rich out into the night with empty hands.

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship

300 E. Oak St.

Ft. Collins, CO 80524

(970) 412-7510