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Luke 1:5-25, 57-64
December 10, 2017

“The Angel Gabriel, Part One”

For the next three Sundays, we are going to be talking about angels.

And if you noticed, once again we have angels looking over us,
courtesy of Barb Overholt!

Angels are central to Luke’s Advent and Christmas stories.

While there are only two named angels in the Bible (Michael and Gabriel) – there are nearly 300 references to angels throughout all of Scripture.

For example, in Genesis, God sent an angel to guard the Garden of Eden after He banished Adam and Eve from it.

In the book of Daniel – Daniel has a vision and the angel Gabriel helps him to interpret it. In Isaiah, angels praise God.

There are also angels throughout the New Testament Gospels. They tend to Jesus when he is tempted in the desert.

They minister to Jesus when he’s in the garden of Gethsemane right before he’s arrested.

They are at the empty tomb on Easter assuring the disciples that Jesus has risen.

Angels deliver important messages from God and when the baby Jesus is born, they are on the scene to proclaim the good news.

Bottom line, when God's going to do something big, He dispatches angels.

When I think of the Christmas story, the first angel that comes to mind is the one that appears to Mary and tells her she is going to bear God's son.

But, that isn't the first angel appearance in the Gospel of Luke.

It actually starts with the angel that appears to Zechariah.

Zechariah was a priest and belonged to a group of priests devoted to God who longed for the coming Messiah.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were described as upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments blamelessly.

Yet there was a problem, Elizabeth was barren, in other words, he and his wife were childless.

In the Old Testament to be without children was viewed as a sign of God's displeasure. Every Jewish family hoped for a son who would be the deliverer, the Messiah King.

So, to be childless meant you were out of God's divine plan.

But, not only were they childless, verse seven tells us they were both well along in years – childbirth opportunities had passed them by.

They were OLD! Think Abraham and Sarah...

Now, no one told Zechariah that he was supposed to kick off the Advent story. All they told him was that he was on priestly duty that week.

So, he reported to the temple.

There were so many priests in Zechariah's day that he only got to do his priestly work in the temple for two weeks a year. So, this work at the temple wasn't exactly routine for him.

And offering incense in the temple was a particular privilege that Zechariah would only be called on to perform once in his lifetime.

So, this is not exactly a typical Sunday morning worship service for Zechariah.

At the supreme hour of this priest's life, as the smoke of incense rises throughout the room – an angel shows up.

Now, you get the feeling that Zechariah was not really expecting to actually encounter an angel of God in the temple.

The Bible says that when the angel showed up, Zechariah was "startled and gripped with fear." You have to remember that God had not appeared to the Israelites, in any form, for over 450 years.

Zechariah was gripped with fear. It had a hold of him.

Maybe he was afraid because he didn't realize the angel was from God. Maybe he was afraid because he knew the angel must be from God.

All we are told was that he was afraid.

When the angel speaks up, he tells Zechariah that his wife is going to have a baby. That their son will be the one to prepare the way of the Lord.

Then Zechariah questions the message the angel delivers, saying
“How will I know this is so?”

To which the angel replies, “I am Gabriel.”

As if to say: are you seriously going to question *me*? Do you not understand *who I am*?

Or, in the more elegant language of our actual Scripture text:

“I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”

Here’s my takeaway from that little exchange ... When Gabe speaks, people oughta listen!

Many pastors who preach on this story end up by telling their listeners that they must not be afraid like Zechariah. They must not be doubters like Zechariah.

But I’m not going to tell you that. For one thing, who can control whether they are scared or not?

However, much pulpit-pounding I might do (which I don’t do very often or very well), however eloquently I might speak (also, not my strong suit), if a huge, bright, winged creature floats down into your kitchen this afternoon, I’ll bet you will be afraid.

But, if you read your bible closely you will realize that angels are *always* saying “fear not,” which tells me it’s a pretty natural reaction to be frightened when they turn up!

I'm inclined not to single Zechariah out on that account.

I also find it troubling that Zechariah is apparently punished for questioning the angel's promise – that God had heard their desperate prayer, and Elizabeth was going to bear a son.

If you'd hoped for something, not just for months or years but for decades, and not seen it materialize, it's understandable that when news like this finally came, you might be a little skeptical, right?

And keep in mind, what was standing in front of Zechariah in that moment was not yet his wife, in her sixth or eighth month looking especially pregnant, but an angel delivering words of promise.

And the thing about promises is that the actual evidence of their truthfulness only comes in hindsight, right?

We can't *know* beyond a shadow of a doubt that a promise is true ahead of time.

That is, we don't have evidence for it in the form of cold, hard facts until we actually *watch* it come true, sometime later on ... which is why faith is required.

And who can simply will themselves out of doubt? If you doubt, you doubt. I don't think I can preach it out of you.

So, I'm not going to tell you that you should not be afraid. That you should not doubt.

I am going to tell you that even good church folk like Zechariah and like you are entitled to your fear and your doubt should an angel of God show up in close proximity to you.

Fear and doubt. It is a natural reaction. Because, God or no God, things like that just don't happen.

Angels don't show up at church. Post-menopausal women do not get pregnant.

Fear, followed by doubt, is an understandable reaction to a direct encounter with the living God.

Meanwhile, Zechariah's friends and colleagues are waiting for him to come out from the inner court of the temple, but this year it's taking a little longer than usual.

And when he emerges, they can see that something has happened. And all Zechariah can do is mumble and flail with his arms in a frustrating game of charades.

And then I can just imagine his return home to Elizabeth – knowing she will be pregnant and not being able to speak to her for the entire nine months!

And then finally, the day comes, and the baby is born. What will his name be? Isn't that the first thing you'd want to know?

In those days in the Jewish tradition, a boy is named for the father. So, of course, this boy will be named Zechariah.

But then Elizabeth says his name will be ... JOHN! The officials object – there are no “John’s” in Zechariah’s family.

And so, they turn to Zechariah, who will no doubt correct his wife and set things right.

He gets a writing tablet and writes... JOHN! And immediately he regains his voice and praises God!

One of the things I love about the Zechariah and Elizabeth story is that though I am sure they were frustrated with God’s delay, they did not give up on God or stop living out their lives in service and in faith.

Even though Zechariah was an Israelite priest, it really is no small feat to recognize that he was on duty in the temple when he learned that Elizabeth was pregnant.

Sure, he was at first doubtful of the word he heard, but, he was there, in the temple, doing his duty.

Simply stated, God had not acted as either Zechariah or Elizabeth had wanted.

God had not granted their life’s expectations and hopes on their timetable.

But, they had not given up on God. They had remained active in their work as God’s followers.

Maybe the question for us this morning is how do we respond when God delays or fails to meet our hopes?

Do we give up on God because we sense God has given up on us? Or do we continue to trust, to serve and to be engaged, even while we wait?

Historian Robert McKenzie tells a story about an experience from his life when he was teaching at the University of Washington.

He and his wife lived near a public bus stop, which provided easy, direct access to campus. And so, McKenzie almost always simply rode the bus to school.

One day, he was running a little bit late and so on a dead sprint arrived at the bus station and jumped on board almost without breaking stride.

As the bus motored down the road toward campus, McKenzie noticed a number of things that he thought were slightly odd.

First, he noticed that many of his fellow normal passengers were not on board.

Second, he noticed that as they made their regular stops along the way that those getting on the bus were again not the normal riders.

Third, he was also surprised that the bus itself was taking a new route to campus.

Ironically, what McKenzie admits in the story is that while he continued to wonder about everyone else — from his fellow passengers to the bus driver — it literally never dawned on him to conclude that he was in fact the one who had made a mistake.

Only after the bus drove several miles past his normal destination did he conclude, and realize, that he had actually caught the wrong bus.

I share this story because I believe that we often make a similar mistake when it comes to our hopes, dreams and God's time table.

We become so focused on where God has gone wrong and how God has failed to live up to our hopes that we fail to think about our own side of the equation while we wait.

Maybe, just maybe God has remained steadfast in caring for and being attentive to us, albeit on a different timetable.

And, maybe, just maybe it is you and I who have failed, in the midst of unanswered hopes and ongoing expectations, to remain equally faithful to God.

Zechariah's hope continued in an active way, even in the midst of prolonged waiting, which is simply sometimes a part of life.

He remained faithful and trusted God's faithfulness.

Do we?

Now, I can't explain why every couple hoping for a baby doesn't get the same answer Zechariah did.

But in God's response to Elizabeth and Zechariah we at least see that God's spirit *can* be at work in parts of our lives over which we've given up hope.

Barrenness? Hopelessness? Emptiness? From a human perspective, it's hard to see the promise in such places. But for God, these situations seem to invite intervention.

And so, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Whether you can believe it or not. Whether or not you find the promise of your wife's conceiving a child utterly *in-conceivable*.

Fear not, Zechariah, even your disbelief won't slow God down when he's ready to get moving on something this important.

After all, it's time to bring John the Baptist onto the scene here, so he can prepare the way for Jesus!

We must understand God does not grant every thought and request we desire, but God is faithful to align our desires with his purpose to bring about his will.

Whatever our circumstances we must trust God to be faithful.

And so, while this year your circumstances may not be perfect for you to celebrate Christmas, that does not mean we are to throw in the towel when it comes to trusting God, we are called to faithful, even when it's difficult.

And we can trust that in the midst of it,20202 whatever fear and doubt we may experience, God will surround us with his grace.

Please pray with me:

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Or, help us in spite of our unbelief.

Whatever it takes, God. When we enter your sanctuary entirely unprepared for you to actually turn up, we know that won't stop you from sending an angel our way.

When we're so discouraged by past experience that it's hard to hang on, we know you are quite capable of bringing life and hope to barren, empty places.

When we're frightened, we trust that you'll continue to send messengers our way with comforting words: "Do not be afraid." "I am with you."

God, lift up those who are discouraged. Bind up the brokenhearted. Bring light into our dark places. Breathe hope back into hopeless hearts. Bring messages of life and peace to a hurting world.

In our best moments, we know you can do these things. And we're eternally grateful that you keep on doing your thing, that you continue working wonders, even when we're not so sure.

You are at work behind every story, and nothing is impossible for you. Thank you, God. In the name of the Christ Child of Bethlehem we pray.

Amen.

