

November 29, 2020

“Zechariah and Mary”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 1 – selected verses

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I'll bet many of you remember a famous radio program called “The Rest of the Story” by Paul Harvey. Everybody seemed to love that program because the stories he told always ended in a unique and insightful way. Like the story I'm about to tell you. A couple of Saturday's ago I decided to watch the Notre Dame versus Boston College football game. Well, not exactly. What actually happened is that it was a nice day, and John wanted to go to Bad Martha's for a beer, and we watched the game on their television. Anyway, while watching, I noticed that there was something different about the Boston College uniforms. All the numbers and logos on the uniforms were of a distinctive reddish pattern which I couldn't quite place. So I decided to investigate – when I got home I googled it and found out that the game was called the “Red Bandana” game. Have any of you ever heard of it? They designate one game a year with that special name. And, of course, the pattern on their uniforms was that paisley red design you see on a red bandana kerchief. But now – here's the rest of the story. The game is played in honor of Boston College alumnus, Welles Crowther, who died in the south tower of the World Trade Center during 9/11. Apparently, Welles was responsible for saving eighteen people on that fateful day before losing his own life. Those individuals he rescued didn't know his name, but they all reported that they were saved by “the man in the red bandana,” because they all remembered him wearing a red bandana over his face to keep the smoke and toxic fumes at bay. So every year, Boston College honors the man in the red bandana! That's the rest of a wonderful story, don't you think? So on this first Sunday of Advent, I thought I might try to do what Paul Harvey did and provide an insightful “rest of the story” perspective to today's Scripture reading.

Portions of what you heard are very familiar. Those about the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her she is going to have a son. But we also heard about this same angel appearing to the high priest Zechariah, telling him that his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son as well. So Elizabeth gives birth to John the Baptist, and Mary gives birth to Jesus. One became the messenger, and the other became the Message! So how does this all unfold? Well, this Sunday of Advent, is the Sunday of “Hope.” And “hope,” biblically defined, is having faith and trust in the word, will and promises of God. And just a mere four verses into the first chapter of his Gospel, St. Luke sets the stage as to how some of us place our hope in the word, will and promises of God, and some of us don't. So let's look at what transpires.

The angel Gabriel is dispatched from heaven with some surprising news for an old priest named Zechariah. Gabriel tells him, “Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will name him John.” Six months later Gabriel is at it again, but this time he appears to a virgin named Mary. “Greetings, favored one,” he tells her. “The Lord is with you. And you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Now I'm guessing all three of these individuals, Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary, were probably leading a relatively normal life up until the angel's visits. And all three probably had something in common. Which is really something we all have in common as well. It's that thing called “hope.” Hope... for a better future, a better life, good health, an end to the pandemic, you name it. But do they, like we often do, look at their hope in a worldly way? That is, a hope that is simply a strong wish or desire for something, rather than having faith and trust that God will act on our best behalf. Well, let's see. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been hoping and praying for a child for a long time. But now they are old and the time and their chance for that seem far gone. Mary, too, is hoping. She is of marrying age. And in the culture of the time, her ambition is to simply get married and have a husband, a family, live a regular life. So what happens in both instances? Is their hope based on wishful thinking or on their faith and trust in the Almighty? In the case of Zechariah, he responds to the angel's message in a worldly way, saying, “How can I be sure of this?” He effectively is asking, “How can I believe this promise, how can I trust God will do this?” It's the equivalent of saying, “That's impossible.” So Zechariah, because of his disbelief, is literally struck mute by Gabriel, unable to speak. In the case of Mary, she also replies with a question, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Her response is more inquisitive, “Okay – just tell me how this is going to happen.” And so Gabriel is much more patient, telling Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Can you see the difference? Both really wanted their earthly hope to become a reality, but how they see this being accomplished comes down to that issue of trust and faith in the promises of God. Zechariah was a priest. He served in the temple for many years. And yet, even in the face of Gabriel telling him, “I stand in the presence of God and it was he who sent me to speak to you,” Zechariah still doubts. In Mary's case, she is not doubting or even contemplating asking the question, “Can I trust,” but rather, “By what means will this happen?” It's a perfectly reasonable question for a woman of any age to ask. She may not understand any of this, but she is willing to put her whole life, her future, into the unknown by placing her full faith and trust in the will and ways of God. And so she gives her consent to what the angel is asking of her. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” Do you know what's interesting? Many of the early church fathers would say that Mary conceived through her ear and heart. And, by doing so, thus begins the story of the world's salvation.

This might be a good time to digress a moment and talk a little more about the word trust. I can provide you many definitions, but I think Christian songwriter and author Sheila Walsh described it best anecdotally. She recalls a summer day from her past when she and her sister Frances went to a local park. “I ran to the swing set and Frances pushed me back and forth, higher and higher. Eventually she grew tired and sat down on the grass nearby. But then a boy known as the neighborhood bully came and began pushing me. I was helpless, holding tightly to the chains of the swing so I wouldn't fall. He wasn't pushing me any higher than my sister had, but I was terrified. I cried and cried until my sister saw what was happening and made him stop.” Looking back on the incident, Sheila learned a lesson. The matter, you see, came down to a five letter word. Trust. Trust made flying higher and higher into the air an exhilarating experience. But when trust was absent, the swing turned into a night mare.¹

And that's true of our lives too. When we don't know who to trust, or what information to trust, things can seem very dark and very frightening. But that's why God came into our world – to give us hope, if we just trust. If we just say ‘yes’ to him. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was known as a great orator. In one of his Advent homilies he presents the drama of the moment when Gabriel addresses Mary. After the sin of our first parents, the whole world was shrouded in darkness, under the dominion of death, living that nightmare. Now God seeks to enter the world anew. He knocks on Mary's door. The only way he can redeem mankind, who was created free in the first place, is by means of a free “yes” to his will. The kingdom of God is dependent on humankind's “yes.” God's power is now tied to the unenforceable “yes” of a young virgin. Heaven and earth holds its breath at this moment of questioning! Will she say “yes?” She ponders. Will her human desires, her worldly wants, hold her back? Be daring Mary, give us your “yes.” This is the crucial moment when, from her lips, from her heart, the answer comes. “Let it be with me according to your word.” Yes!

Let's go back to the scripture again, to Zechariah. Mary never doubted what she was told by the angel and she eventually goes to visit the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah. So since Zechariah couldn't speak, what might have he thought when Mary arrived at their house telling them her amazing news. I can imagine the old priest, who should have known better than to doubt in the first place, looking at this girl. Zechariah had to have realized how he had failed to trust God in the face of God's outreach. And now he is humbled by his failure. No wonder that when he is finally able to speak again, the first thing he does is to raise a prayer of faith and trust to the Almighty, realizing that nothing is impossible with

¹ What Is Faith, David Jeremiah

God.² And let this be a lesson for us as well. You see, even though Zechariah had to wait – for years, even though he questioned, even though he doubted, still... still God proved faithful to keep his promise to fulfill Zechariah's hope. Which means, that even though you sometimes have to wait, even though you sometimes question, even though you sometimes doubt, still... still God will prove faithful to keep his promise to fulfill your hope. If you just trust, if you just say, "yes!" And that my friends, is the rest of the story. Amen, and "Good Day!"

² Introduction to the Gospel of Luke, Elizabeth Scalia