

“Be Mary; Don’t Be Zechariah!”

Scripture: Luke 1: 5 – 20; 26 - 38

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Have you seen those books, “Eat This – NOT That!”? They’re books that open up to show two pictures of food, side by side on each facing page, and one is food you should eat and one is the food you should NEVER eat! Well, my husband John always eats on the **wrong** page. Last Sunday, after our fantastic worship service, we had that beautiful luncheon downstairs: bountiful, delicious, and healthy, cooked up by Mujeres and Causa. Well, after we got home, I caught John rifling through the Halloween candy. John grumbled, “That lunch was too healthy for me.” But, this past Thursday, whose table was not full of food from the “wrong” page? I hope you had a great Thanksgiving, with lots of “NOT That!” food.

Actually those “Eat This – NOT That!” books provide us with a great template for this morning’s Scripture lessons. Because, just like those books, this morning’s lessons present two images – side by side. One is an image of someone we should strive to be like. The other is an image of someone we should strive to NOT be like.

We begin Advent with these two episodes from Luke’s masterful Christmas drama. Luke intends us to read the stories of Zechariah and Mary simultaneously. Luke has composed these two stories as a diptych – a diptych is a two-paneled painting, two images, side by side of exact same proportions. In fact, a diptych is like our two Advent Banners -- two images, meant to be displayed together, of equal proportion.

So, here in Luke we have a literary diptych.

- Two people, righteous and godly: Mary and Zechariah.
- Two people, terrified by a visiting angel.
- Two people, both childless, but the angel tells both that a child is coming, is promised to each.
- Two people ask a question of the angel – along the lines of “How can this be. . .”

But then, at this point, at the point of Mary’s and Zechariah’s question, the inner dimensions of the story change. The inner dimensions of the characters show themselves to be different. The outer dimensions remain matched. But something different is happening deep inside each story

at the question. One person is made silent, he is muted for his question -- Zechariah. Another person, after her question sings -- Mary. One muted; One rhapsodizes. One punished, one exalted.

It's like Luke is saying, "Be Mary! Don't be Zechariah!"

What is the problem, the deficiency of Zechariah? Let's read this section again:

<sup>18</sup> Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is *well along* in years."

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this *good news*.<sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

What does that mean, that Zechariah didn't "believe" the angel's words?

I puzzled over this for a week. (I do take a long time to prepare a sermon.) Zechariah has all the marks of a "believer." Luke writes that Zechariah was "righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees *blamelessly*."

So what is the problem? Zechariah's righteous, fulfills the law, faithfully serves at the temple. And now he's engaged in a conversation with an *angel!* That's more believing than I've ever done!

Where's the **unbelief** here? Zechariah has stopped believing in **Promise** – the promise of his life and the promises of God.

Today I want to talk about the significance of Promise in one's life – having a sense that your life has Promise, and that your life is under the power and direction of a God of Promise. And as we get into this, I want to make a **SECOND** point: about children. Mary is practically a child in this story – **AND SHE IS SPIRITUAL CHILD**. The definition of a child, both chronological and **SPIRITUAL**, is one who experiences life as **full of promise**.

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It just took one thing, one disappointment in Zechariah's life, to move him from belief to unbelief, although it's a big one, it's a bitter one. He doesn't have a child. This one thing -- this loss -- has pushed him, slowly over the years, from Believing to Unbelieving.

Is there is one big thing, one huge disappointment, one bitter loss that threatens to push us toward unbelief? The loss of a business or job, the breakdown of a marriage, the drifting of an adult child into a destructive life-style, the erosion of one's health? That one thing may be shifting us from Belief to Unbelief.

Oh, I don't mean that we don't believe in **God**. But we no longer believe that our life has **promise**. We no longer believe that our life is under the power of a **God of Promise**. We no longer feel we can **trust** God.

The Greek word in this passage, translated as "Belief" is *pisteuo*. *Pisteuo* conveys *not* agreeing with a conceptual idea – like "the earth is round," but rather "trust," "faith in." "So, this isn't a word about a accepting a fact or claiming a proposition is true, this isn't a word about saying, "Yes" or "No" to claims of science. This word, Believe or *Pisteuo*, is a relational word, it's about trusting in someone, having faith in someone – about trusting God.

Zechariah doesn't trust God, anymore. A long time ago this one big disappointment began to dry up his trust. And so now, quite naturally, he doesn't trust the promise God is making here, the promise carried by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel says, "God has heard your prayers. And NOW is the moment when God will fulfill your hope for a child."

*When Zechariah lost hope he would ever have that one thing, he lost his trust that God keeps promises, he lost his sense of life's promise!*

What do I mean by a sense of Promise? It's that sense that your life was made for something of purpose and goodness! It's a sense that, however difficult things are RIGHT NOW, the future will open up for you. When we live with a sense of promise, it isn't as though everything is going so well at the moment. Indeed, we're in an *in-between* state. The promise has not yet been fulfilled. We feel hope, but, as Paul says, hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? (Romans 8:24).

Promise is Hope, but *hope improved*. Promise is Hope 2.0. Two people, joined by hope, make a promise! Two people, secured by a relationship of trust, make a promise. Promise is Hope, 2.0.

Zechariah is down to Hope 1.0. He's lost the two-ness of hope – the two-ness of Promise. He feels that he's out there alone, in a cold, unyielding world, governed by a detached God he can't trust. So, Zechariah says, "How can this be? I am too old to have a child. It's not gonna happen. The impersonal, unbending rules of life won't yield to the prayers of this old man."

Is there a Zechariah in the house?

At this point, Luke introduces us to Mary, and intentionally contrasts Mary with Zechariah. One of the most important facts about Mary is that she is a child. Luke emphasizes her virginity, a symbol of her child-likeness. You know Luke repeatedly lifts up children, and indeed, says that we all must become LIKE Children – regardless of our age! In Luke 18 we read: "Let the

children come to me, and do not hinder them; for **to such** belongs the kingdom of God.” And Luke writes, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”<sup>i</sup> And in Luke 10, Jesus prays to God, “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”<sup>ii</sup> To enter the kingdom of God, to be an agent of the Kingdom of God, we need to be spiritual children.

Where does that leave Zechariah? Where does that leave us? With Good News! God’s promises are being fulfilled, even when we’ve lost **our** sense of promise. Despite Zechariah’s unbelief, God continues to **unfold** his plan of redemption. At the right moment, Elizabeth gets pregnant. As promised, John the Baptist is born, and finally, as decreed, Zechariah is released from muteness and sings with joy. The promises of God are still **unfolding**, whether or not we feel this promise.

One of my favorite people is Gayle Bud O’Grady, a cellist with the Oregon Symphony Orchestra. I took cello from Gayle for years – a complete waste of her talent. Gayle is very humble, but her cello-playing is so exquisite, it’s brought me to tears in our lessons. A huge ache on Gayle’s heart was her daughter, Aisling, who had graduated from high school but couldn’t get herself together for the next steps of life. Several times Gayle brought her along to our cello lessons, just to give Aisling a reason to get out of bed. Well, things got worse and worse. One night, when Gayle and Aisling were arguing, Aisling threw Gayle down and repeatedly punched her. The police were called and they urged Gayle to get a restraining order and get Aisling out of the house. Gayle didn’t know what else to do. Ultimately Aisling ended up on the streets, homeless in Portland.

But, when Gayle was worn out, and couldn’t go any further with Aisling, a family friend stepped forward. (Even when we lose our sense of promise, God continues to unfold his promises.) She got Aisling connected to Outside In, a Portland program that helps young people get off the street. There Aisling enrolled programs that taught her self-management. But even more, she was introduced to soccer.

Last fall, I heard the rest of Aisling’s story. She was on her way to Rio De Janeiro, to play on an all-star team of women soccer players, competing in the Homeless World Soccer Cup Games. Aisling said that “playing (soccer) made her feel *special, for the first time in a long time.*” Aisling recovered her sense of promise. And, isn’t it interesting that Aisling recovered her sense of promise, by **play**? By playing like a child, playing a game we learn in childhood! Aisling became, again, a spiritual child, a person with a sense of promise.<sup>iii</sup>

Hannah Arendt was an important political philosopher of the last century, who wrote about the promise embodied in children. Arendt said that the whole human enterprise depends upon the sense of promise that is embodied in *new-born* children: “The miracle that saves the world. . .from its ruin is ultimately rooted in the fact (that we are creatures who are born.) It is, in order

words, the birth of new (children) and the(ir) new beginning. . . (that) bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence. . . It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in a few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings.' 'A child has been born unto us.'"<sup>iv</sup>

A child has been born unto us! Can Christmas also be, "A child has been **reborn, within us?**" Can we recover that sense of being spiritual children, children of promise? Yes! Even Zechariah was shown that his life still had promise, promise beyond his greatest hopes. You know, I began this sermon by advising, "Be Mary; Don't be Zechariah." But now I think I should say, "Be Mary! And, be Zechariah! Zechariah, who recovers his sense of Promise!" That's my Advent prayer for all of us this week, the week of Hope, the week of Promise.

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 18: 16 -17

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 10: 21

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2010/09/through\\_street\\_soccer\\_homeless.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2010/09/through_street_soccer_homeless.html)

<sup>iv</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, page 247 (University of Chicago Press, 1958),