

## QUESTIONS OF ADVENT: HOW CAN THIS BE?

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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**TEXT:** Luke 1:26-38

Jerry Turner and his mother were on their way to the rehearsal for the Christmas pageant and Jerry was not too thrilled about it. “Do I have to be in the pageant again?” he asked rather reluctantly.

“No, you don't *have* to be in it,” his mother replied. “But it *is* a nice tradition in our church, and a good reminder to all of us of Jesus birth.”

“Well, it's the same old thing every year. Besides, I don't like to wear a bathrobe in front of all those people. Why do we make such a fuss about it? What can that baby do?” Jerry was ten-years-old, and like most 10-year-olds, he felt that he needed a thorough explanation of everything in life.

His mother paused before answering. “Hmm, the baby Jesus didn't *do* anything, at least not while He was a baby”, she tried to find some way to answer her son. “It was when he grew up that he did what God sent Him to do.”

So, Jerry tried another tack, “what did the shepherds have to do with it anyway?”

“The shepherds were the first ones to hear about it. God sent His angels...” but before she could continue, Jerry broke in: “But what are angels? Little girls in white dresses?” Jerry teased.

“No, angels are...” his mother hesitated, “angels are like messengers from God. And as I was saying, God sent some angels to tell the shepherds about Jesus’ birth.”

“Why didn't God tell the newspapers if he wanted to spread the news about Jesus?”, Jerry wanted to know.

“I'll that many people have asked that kind of question through the years”, his mother responded, “but you know, God does things in His own way and we people often wonder why. But it's important for us to believe that God's way is the best.

“Even about sending a baby to be our Savior?”, Jerry persisted.

“Yes, even to sending us a baby, for if God was going to come to us as a person, He had to start out as we all start out, that is, as a baby.

It didn't make a whole lot of sense to Jerry, but it seemed to him he wasn't going to get the logical answers a 10-year-old should expect, so I leaned back in his seat as they approached the church and said, “yeah, I guess so.”

As they got out of the car, his mother asked, “do you feel OK about being in the pageant, and being as shepherd? You know you don't have to.”

“Yeah, I'll be a shepherd again. But maybe this will be my last year. And I still don't know why we make so much fuss about a little baby.”<sup>1</sup>

Questions – why? Why make such a fuss about a baby? Why would God send a baby anyway?

This Advent – we're looking at the questions that people had surrounding the birth of Jesus – and how their answers can speak to us in our faith journey.

And as we look at these questions – we see that there were questions about two babies that were going to be born. We read about them in the Gospel of Luke. The first one we heard about last week was the announcement about the birth of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah. And the other, of course was the announcement of the coming of baby Jesus to Mary. Both brought questions – with different responses.

Open your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke, in the New Testament and follow along with me as look at the story about the doubt of Zechariah and the faith of Mary.

Beginning at verse 5, we hear the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth, an elderly couple who were faithful and upright in the sight of God. And they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive. Zechariah was a priest who served in the Temple. One day, when he was on duty, the angel Gabriel came to him and told him that Elizabeth was going to have a baby! This baby will be John the Baptist.

The announcement of the second baby starts at verse 26, our Scripture reading for today. Listen as I read **Luke 1:26-38**. Good news – Jesus is coming, the great and mighty Son of God.

<sup>26</sup> *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee,* <sup>27</sup> *to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.* <sup>28</sup> *Gabriel appeared to her and said,*

*“Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you.”<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>29</sup> *Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.* <sup>30</sup> *“Don't be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God!* <sup>31</sup> *You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.* <sup>32</sup> *He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.* <sup>33</sup> *And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”* <sup>34</sup> *Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”* <sup>35</sup> *The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.* <sup>36</sup> *What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month.* <sup>37</sup> *For nothing is impossible with God.* <sup>38</sup> *Mary responded, “I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her.*

When you put the announcement about the birth of John the Baptist and the announcement of the birth of Jesus side by side you can see a lot of amazing similarities:

- Both Zechariah and Mary are good, God-fearing people
- The angel Gabriel comes to see both Zechariah and Mary
- Both Zechariah and Mary were afraid when they saw the angel – and the angel said, “Don’t be afraid”
- Gabriel brought the news about a miraculous birth that was coming to both – as well as the description about what this baby would accomplish in their lifetime

But there is a big difference in the way these two stories end. At the conclusion of the story about John the Baptist, Zechariah is left speechless because God took away his ability to speak for nine months. (Luke 1:19-22) But at the end of the story about Jesus, Mary is full of the glory of God and is able to sing a song of praise to God. (Luke 1:46-56)

Now what made the difference? The difference is in the way Zechariah and Mary responded to the news from Gabriel about the upcoming birth.

Look at verse 13. Gabriel says, *“Don’t fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife will bear a son by you. You are to name him John.”* Now look how Zechariah responds. Verse 18. *“Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.’”* Now if you read this passage in the Message Bible, it reads like this: *“Do you expect me to believe this? I’m an old man and my wife is an old woman.”* This was just too hard to believe. Zechariah doubted that this message could be true. Somehow, he had forgotten that he was talking to the angel of the Lord – who brought a message from God. How could that be a lie? And what about all those stories from the Old Testament that he had learned – stories about old women who had given birth. Sarah was 90 years old! But Zechariah wasn’t thinking about that...it seems all Zechariah could see was the impossibility of his situation.

So, Zechariah was disciplined for his unbelief. Look at verse 20. Gabriel says, *“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 proper time.”* Nine months. Nine months of silence.

Now, let’s look at how Mary responds to this announcement from Gabriel. Gabriel tells her that she will become pregnant and give birth to a son named Jesus. So, Mary asks, *“How will this be since I am a virgin?”* She is asking for information – *how is this going to work?* Will she have to do something – get married to Joseph sooner? Change her plans? The angel tells her that she will conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notice what Mary does next. She doesn’t question or doubt. She doesn’t raise objections. Instead she believes and accepts the news. Look at verse 38: *“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”* Later in verse 45, we hear Elizabeth describing

Mary by saying, *“Blessed is she who has believed what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”* She believed and accepted –she had faith.

You know, when you stop to think about how difficult life would be for Mary – it’s amazing that she was so willing to accept God’s call on her life. Imagine the possible things that could happen when the news of her miraculous pregnancy became public:

- The man she was engaged to – Joseph – could divorce her and publicly declare her to be unfaithful
- Her family might not believe her story and they could reject her and disown her.
- The gossip would certainly spread all over Nazareth and people would accuse her of adultery. She would most certainly be shunned by her neighbors.
- According to the law, the punishment for adultery was death by stoning. It was a possibility that Mary could have been stoned to death. (Deuteronomy 22:22-24).

And yet, despite all the possible risks, Mary was still able to say, *“Let it be with me according to your word.”*

When Mary said that, she didn’t know what all the answers to her questions might be. She didn’t know what pain or sorrow she might have to face. All she knew was that God was asking her to serve Him, and she willingly obeyed. She had faith in the promises of God – that God would be with her and that nothing would be impossible with Him.

That really is the big difference between Zechariah and Mary. Zechariah looked at an impossible situation and doubted. Mary saw an impossible situation as well – but she was willing to trust God, even when faced with the potential of disaster. As Rev. Adrian Dieleman says, *“Do you know what unbelief does? Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God. That was Zechariah’s problem. But you know what faith does? Faith puts God between us and our circumstances. That was Mary’s way of dealing with the unexpected and the impossible.”*<sup>3</sup>

Now I must admit – I think all of us all too often respond more like Zechariah than Mary. When situations come our way that seem absolutely impossible – how easy is it to be focused on the situation ... rather than on God. Our circumstances seem to loom very large in our lives and they get in the way of our faith in God. We start to believe that the struggles we are going through are just too big for God. When we should really be thinking that God is bigger than anything we might be going through.

Mary believed she could face this impossible situation of having a baby because she knew two things about God. First, Gabriel had told her that God is with her and that she didn’t have to be afraid God would give her the strength and courage to face anything.

And then Gabriel told her that nothing was impossible for God. No matter how impossible a situation seemed, God is able to work through that....and accomplish His plan and purpose. Nothing is too hard for Him.

Just think what would happen in our lives if we had the kind of faith that believed that no matter what we went through, God would be with us. Faith that said nothing is too hard for God – that He will be able to sustain us and deliver us, no matter what.

The Life Application Bible suggests that what we need to do is to “insert your specific needs into the question, ‘Is anything too hard for the Lord? ‘Is this habit I’m trying to break too hard for Him?’ ‘Is this day in my life too hard for the Lord?’ ‘Is the communication problem I’m having too hard for Him?’ Asking the question this way reminds you that God is personally involved in your life and nudges you to ask for his power to help you.”

Faith really is believing that God is with you no matter what -- even if the circumstances around you are falling apart...believing that God is still there holding you up. It’s believing that what the Lord will do what He said He would do. James Kok says that “*Faith is the capacity to trust God while not being able to make sense out of everything.*”<sup>4</sup> We may not always understand what is happening and we may not always understand where God is leading us – but we do know God is there for us and will carry through whatever happens. We have nothing to fear.

Carol Kuykendall is a writer for the Guideposts Daily Devotional books. In 2007, Carol and her husband Lynn were BOTH diagnosed with cancer. Lynn had been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. And then 6 weeks later, Carol was diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer. Another biopsy showed that the cancer had spread to her lungs. She was so discouraged.

Soon, the lies started seeping into her soul: Cancer always wins. You’ll never get well. God doesn’t hear your prayers. Your faith isn’t even strong enough to get you through this. Satan continued to attack Carolyn’s faith – and soon his lies seemed bigger than all of God’s promises.

That’s when her daughter Kendall came by to help. She gave her mom a gift, saying “This is to help you to remember to believe God.” Inside was a wooden block with letters spelling out the word BELIEVE.

Carol placed it on a windowsill above the sink where she would see it frequently. After looking at it many times, she was stunned to see the word LIE right there in the middle of the word BE – LIE – VE.

She said, “What a powerful reminder that when I feel discouraged, I can focus on the LIE ...or step back and BELIEVE God’s truth, which is so much bigger: the truth that God knows our suffering and walks with us and will meet all our needs. Most of all, that He promises a future filled with hope, regardless our circumstances.”

Now that's the kind of faith Mary had. Instead of focusing on the lies of how impossible her situation was – she believed and had faith in God. Faith in God's promises. Faith that God will be with her – and that nothing is impossible with God.

When Carol was in the hospital, her pastor visited her and told her to “Be open to the possibilities”. Those were encouraging words that Carol kept focusing on. And I can say that I believe Mary probably could affirm these words as well.<sup>5</sup>

*Be open to the possibilities* ... that these circumstances hold more than I see right now.  
*Be open to the possibilities* ... of God's promise to grow good things in the hard places.  
*Be open to the possibilities* ... of discovering new hope.  
*Be open to the possibilities* ... one day at a time.

Are you open to the possibilities that God can do in *your* life?

## **PRAYER**

## **INVITATION**

## **RESOURCES**

<sup>1</sup>Merle G. Franke, “*Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit*”, CSS Publishing , 1995, pp. 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>Adrian Dieleman, “*Two Questions at Christmas*”, [www.trinitycrc.org](http://www.trinitycrc.org)

<sup>3</sup>*Life Application Bible*, page 34, note on Genesis 18:14.

<sup>4</sup>James Kok quote on Faith. <http://www.lifequoteslib.com/quotes/faith.html>

<sup>5</sup>Carol Kuykendall, *Daily Guideposts 2008*, pages 11 and 91-92