Pastor Jim West  
December 18, 2016  
Advent 2016: *How Shall I Know This?*  
Luke 1:3-20

This morning we gather just one week away from Christmas, and so my message this morning is devoted to preparing our hearts for the great celebration of our Savior’s birth. Our text comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 3-20. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

First let us acknowledge that only Luke takes time to record this history regarding Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. Why is that? As I’ve mentioned to you in the past, Luke defines himself as one who “followed all things closely for some time past” and therefore sets out to provide an “orderly account” of the history surrounding Jesus of Nazareth. By his own admission, Luke is more of an investigative reporter than any of the other gospel accounts. Given the details in Luke’s gospel surrounding the birth of Christ, including the encounter with angels experienced by Mary and Joseph, the Magi, the visiting shepherds, the dedication of Jesus in the temple, and the narrative of Jesus being left behind in the temple when he was 12, it stands to reason that Luke had access to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It’s likely, then, that Mary shared this story with Luke, for as we learn later, Mary and Elizabeth were related, though Elizabeth was quite a bit older than Mary.

So we can easily imagine how Luke learned about this information, but why include the “pre-birth” story of John the Baptist in his gospel? Let’s take a closer look and I think we’ll see why.

We learn early on that Z. and E. were both “righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” Clearly Z. and E. are not without sin, but Luke’s description helps us to understand that this couple loves God, and they are not willfully rebellious or deceptive about their devotion. This glowing description sets the stage for what comes next in vs. 7: But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

In the ancient world it was often thought that a woman was cursed if she could not bear children. Luke makes it very clear: Elizabeth was not barren as a result of her sin or some curse from God…indeed, she was considered righteous before God. She was simply barren…and now she is not only barren, she and her husband are also “advanced in years.” They’re old. Too old to even think about having a child.

The story goes on to tell us that Z. was a priest, and they had gone up to Jerusalem for a few weeks so that Z. could serve his rotation performing his temple duties. And that’s how it worked…it took hundreds of priests to make the temple industry run in Jerusalem, so priests
from different divisions would serve on an annual rotation. Z. is chosen by lot to enter the
temple and burn incense, but while he is in the temple, something very unexpected
happens…God shows up through one of his messengers…an angel of the Lord. And not just any
angel…this is Gabriel, an angel of great rank and stature, one who stands (not bows) in the
presence of God. Luke reports that Z. was “troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him.” I
suspect that is the understatement of the year. To be in the presence of Gabriel was second only
to standing in the presence of God Himself…that would undo all of us.

By the way, I can’t help but find a bit of irony and humor here. Z. was a priest…he was a pro.
He had been in the temple hundreds of times, served his rotation for decades, and here’s what we
can observe: when Zechariah enters the temple, he doesn’t expect to encounter God there! How
true is that of so many of us who have been going to church our whole lives? Religion is
comfortable, but encountering God is often not! Yet is it not the encounter with God that
changes a human heart? Indeed, it is hearing from God that we actually need and long for, and it
is in the house of the Lord that we should hope to meet with Him. How different would our
worship experience be if we entered into each time of worship with an expectation that God was
going to show up!

Gabriel sees the surprise and distress that his presence has brought upon Z., so he speaks with
calm assurance, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife
Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and
gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from
his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and
he will go before him in the spirit and the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the
children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people
prepared.”

Now, Gabriel just said a lot…let’s quickly unpack that for a minute. First, Gabriel tells Z. that
God has heard his prayer. I think we can assume that the prayer of Z. and E. for years and years
and years was this: O Lord, please give us a child! How that prayer has been lifted up over and
over again throughout the centuries by those who are barren. Give heed friends: God hears those
prayers…He has heard every one of those prayers. But note, during their late teens, and 20’s,
and 30’s and 40’s…this faithful couple did not conceive. Surely they must have been
questioning how they were praying, or how they were living. Surely they were tempted to
reason that their sin must have brought about a curse from God that rendered them barren, or that
God was uncaring or unwilling to hear their prayers. Yet we know now that was not the case at
all. God heard their prayers all along, but God had a plan, and His plan for them was different
then their plan for them. This is a hard pill to swallow, whether you are desperate to be pregnant
like Elizabeth, or you are desperate because you discover that you are pregnant, like Mary!
God’s plan is perfect, but it often comes as a surprise, and rarely do God’s plans align perfectly with our desires. This is where we must learn to trust God. I’ll come back to that in minute.

Gabriel goes on to prophesy about the son who will be born unto them. Gabriel states that John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth. To the best of my knowledge, no one else in the scriptures was ever said to have been filled with the Holy Spirit at birth. Jesus will say of John the Baptist, “Among those born of women none is greater than John.” Clearly this son who will be miraculously conceived within the aged womb of Elizabeth is no ordinary child.

But friends, listen: there is no such thing as an ordinary child. Can we not gather from the text how extraordinary God’s plan is for every human life? His plan is different for different people, but can we read this story and come to the conclusion that the birth of a human life is random or accidental or ordinary? John the Baptist is an extraordinary person who plays a very important role in the history of salvation, yet should we not think that every human life is known by God and created with purpose? There is much for us to consider along this line, but we must move on.

Gabriel reveals that this son born to E. and Z. will be the messenger who prepares the way of the Lord as was spoken by the prophet Malachi (3:1). Through his preaching of repentance, John (being filled with power in the spirit of Elijah) will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord, he will serve to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

Church, did you hear what is required to be prepared for the coming of the Lord? Is it not repentance? What power is there that turns the hearts of men back to the Lord? What force can melt the heart of a sinful and selfish father such that he devotes himself to his children instead of his work, his hobbies, or his addictions? What is required for those who are wrong to admit that they are wrong and to seek counsel from those with wisdom? Is it not repentance?

John the Baptist is sent to prepare the way of the Lord. His message of repentance makes ready the people of God to receive their King, the Messiah, the Savior. Why is repentance necessary to prepare our hearts this Christmas? Listen: only those who know they need saving will receive with joy the good news that unto us a SAVIOR has been born. Only those who recognize the great and terrible sentence that justice demands for those who have transgressed the laws of God will receive with glad and humble hearts the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world through his sacrificial death on a cross.

If Christmas…the celebration of our Savior’s birth…if Christmas means nothing to you, may I remind you of your sin? May I offend you for the sake of preparing you for the coming of the Lord? Have you lied? You are a liar. Have you stolen? You are a thief. Have you imagined
yourself with one who is not your spouse? You are an adulterer in your heart. Have you longed for that which belongs to another? You have coveted. Have you allowed anything in your life to hold higher value and prominence than the Lord of the universe who created you, died for you, and even now sustains your life with abundance? Then you are an idolater. “STOP!” you say. “I can’t take it anymore; I cannot stand to look upon my sin and acknowledge the stain that deserves hell on my best day.” Listen friends: hell is our destiny if we should fail to look upon our sin with horror and recognize its cost. Surely repentance is required that we might look to the star over Bethlehem and praise God for a Savior who is Christ the Lord. We need not journey for months like the Magi, for the Christ has risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father, and even now He is here. His Holy Spirit beckons all who would acknowledge their sin to repent and call upon the name of the Lamb for the forgiveness of sins…The Lamb has a name. It is the name above all names, and there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. It is the name of Jesus. This is the Gospel…it is good news for all the people. Yet is news that remains irrelevant to those who will not see their sin and repent. Such was why God appointed John to prepare the way, even as he raises up others this day to prepare the hearts of men, women, and children to receive their Savior through repentance and faith.

Gabriel has revealed the plan of God to Z., but poor Z… He cannot fathom what he is now hearing from the angel. Too long has he prayed for a miracle, and too long has God remained silent. Years of frustration and sadness have made his heart hardened to the promises of God. Like so many of us, Z. has determined his theology by the outcomes he has sought of the Lord. “Get me out of this mess Lord, and I’ll serve you forever.” “Grant me a child Lord, and I’ll know you are there.” “Save my sick wife, God, and I’ll proclaim your name from the rooftops.” But when God does not provide in the way we desire, our faith shrinks, and as time goes by, we may be religious, but we no longer trust God.

Such is why Z. replies to Gabriel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” (Even the ancient husbands knew better than to call their wives “old.”)

Notice, Z. has a valid question regarding his age and that of his wife, but it’s the first question that gets him in trouble with Gabriel. Z. asks the question of our age, “How shall I know this?”

How shall I be certain that this promise will come to pass? How can I guard myself against being duped? Where is the collateral in case this deal doesn’t close? I need a sign…a deposit if you will…something biblical, you know, an earthquake or a talking donkey or something that guarantees me that my hope will not be in vain. I need some proof. Otherwise, how shall I know this revelation of God can be trusted? I’ve trusted God before but been disappointed with the outcome…I really don’t think God can be trusted.
This is a theme I will unpack in greater detail on Christmas Eve, but let us for now acknowledge that we are quite sympathetic to Z.’s question. I suspect there are many of us who have asked the same question regarding the revelation of God. How can I know this? How am I supposed to believe that God created the universe, that God loves me, that God is there, that God sent His Son to die for me that I might be forgiven and inherit eternal life? How can I know that when I die I will go to heaven? How can I know this?

It is a fair question. But now let me ask you this: do you know of a loving relationship that does not present the same dilemma to some degree?

Would not the child be justified in asking the parent: How shall I know that you love me? How shall I know that you will provide for me? How shall I know that I will be safe in your home? The parent would cry, “Look to the past! Look to all the meals I have provided. Look to the sacrifices I have made for you. Look to fierceness of my loyalties and the attention I give to every detail of your existence!” But what if the child should say, “But I asked to rest, and you made me work. I asked for pizza, and you served me broccoli. I asked for a sick day, and you made me go to school. I’m not sure I can trust you…so how shall I know this?”

When we stand at the altar we make vows of love…we make promises. And yet should not the bride ask of the br agile, “How shall I know this?” What guarantees can you make me that our love will not ebb away? What proof can you provide that we shall always be as we are now? How shall we join in holy matrimony when I cannot trust that you will always give me what I want?

Ahh…we do not hold such expectations of our loving relationships, do we? In fact, we are all quite familiar with the notion of faith in a promise. The child has faith in the mother’s promise that meals will be served, clothes will be washed, and the home will be secured. It is in the mother’s faithfulness to a promise that the child learns to love the parent and the parent demonstrates her love to the child. The bride knowingly enters into marriage in faith that the promises made at the altar will be binding, even amidst hardships, poverty, sickness…even unto death.

Perhaps is it our experience with faith in those we love on this earth that poisons the well of faith from which we should draw upon in our relationship to God, for who has not been disappointed by a parent or a spouse or an employer or a friend? And who of us has not been a disappointment to those to whom we made promises? When promises are not kept, we…and those we love…become untrusting, embittered, and cautious.

Yet loving relationships always require faith, and in our loving relationships with one another, repentance and forgiveness are also requisite if the relationship is to endure. We all know this
true. Such is the message of our text this morning: faith and repentance are required, as is forgiveness when it comes to our relationship with God. But note the glaring exception to our earthly relationships: unlike us, God is faithful. God has never broken a promise. God’s plan is perfect, and His word is not to be compared to the well-intentioned but fallen promises of our earthly loved ones. God’s word is TRUE, He can be trusted for He is perfectly faithful, and His history of faithfulness is evident for all ages and in every instance. Such is why the Lord says to Job in the hour of his complaint, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Where were you when I told the sea where it begins and ends?”

Friends, God can be trusted. His plans are different than your plans, but His plans for perfect and good. He is our good, good Father, and He is faithful. We cannot live in a loving relationship without demonstrating some faith, and when our faith falters…when we have been unfaithful to the relationship, we need to repent and receive forgiveness so that the relationship can be restored. Jesus came to us in the flesh so that we would know once and for all that God can be trusted. He came as our Father, and He came as a Bridegroom to show his love for the Bride…that’s us. Can you see that Christmas is the greatest love story ever told?

We will pick up here on Saturday night. For now, may our hearts be prepared for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of every promise God ever made.

Let us pray.