December 24, 2016
Pastor Jim West
Advent 2016: The Promise of Christmas

Merry Christmas! Let me begin with a question: What would you think if I stood here this evening and promised you that when the service was over, if you had successfully stayed awake in my sermon, you would receive $100? Would that motivate you to take some notes? Would you be inclined to pay attention? I suspect you would IF you thought I was trustworthy…that is, if you believed me to be the kind of man who keeps his promises, right?

However, if you believed me to be untrustworthy…if I was known to be a pontificating liar…then you would likely take a nap and think even less of me than you did when you walked in the door. For we all know that to make promises we don’t intend to keep is wrong…it reveals a lack of character; and in every culture throughout history such behavior is condemned and shunned. We also know that making and keeping promises is a sign of virtue, and that has always been true as well, right?

So tonight we will explore the promise of Christmas, and the relationship between promises and faith as it speaks to any and all loving relationships. To get started we will read two angel stories that happened within six months of each other leading up to the birth of Jesus. The first story is one we looked at last Sunday, when the angel Gabriel shows up in the temple and tells the elderly priest named Zechariah that his elderly wife Elizabeth, who has been barren her whole life, will conceive and give birth to a son. The second story is perhaps the most famous angel story ever told; and that, of course, is the story of Gabriel coming to the virgin named Mary to announce that she would conceive and bear a child who would be called the Son of the Most High! Now we’re reading both of these stories tonight so that we can compare the way Zechariah responds to the promises of God versus the way Mary responds to the promises of God. So…please stand, and let’s read these stories together beginning with Luke 1:12-20.

In the first story that we read, the elderly priest named Zechariah hears the promises of God as spoken by the angel Gabriel. The promise is this: “Zechariah, 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…” The angel goes on to describe John’s life and character, as well as the role he will play in preparing the people to receive the Christ who is to come. Now let’s look closely at how Zechariah responds to this good news. He says, “How can I know this?”

Now…the way we respond to the promises of God indicates what we believe to be true about God’s character. When Zechariah asks, “How can I know this?” he in essence is saying, “I’m not...
Sure God can be trusted. I need some proof; I need some kind of guarantee that this will come to pass before I’m willing to have faith in what you are saying. How can I KNOW this, because I’m not inclined to BELIEVE the promise that you have made.” Why would Zechariah respond that way? After all, Z. is a priest, and he’s been a priest for a long time. Would not a priest be a man of great faith? Not necessarily. All of us, religious and non-religious people alike, can become quite jaded when it comes to believing the promises of God if we have been hurt and disappointed in our past. Now, in this case, we might assume that Zechariah has become disillusioned after decades of praying for a child and finding God to be silent, and now he’s old and his wife is old...so not only are they a bit jaded, but the circumstances of their lives make this promise even more difficult to believe. In other words, had this angel shown up 20 years ago with the same message, he would have rejoiced at the promises of God and his faith would have been encouraged that God heard and answered his prayer in a timely fashion. But now...after all these years...he is suspicious and unbelieving. Promises are no longer enough for Zechariah...he wants proof. Does that sound familiar to anybody? Let me pause here for a minute.

You know, it’s a well-known fact that most people start out in life believing that God is there. There was an article published by a scientific journal not long ago theorizing that it may be scientifically impossible for human beings to be atheists, since the propensity to think about God is so hardwired into all of us. Why do we all think about God so much? After all, hasn’t science proven that God does not exist? No...in fact, there is more than sufficient evidence that God exists for the unbiased observer: evidence such as the existence of a universe that had a beginning; the moral law that is common among all people groups; the observable and brilliant design and genetic “language” found in the DNA of a single cell organism that would necessarily need to exist prior to any process of evolution; the fundamental, observable reality of personality as compared to matter consisting of similar substance that is impersonal. A theistic worldview is the simplest and most satisfying answer given what we can observe in the world around us beginning with ourselves. Such is why we are not naturally predisposed towards atheism; however, in the Western world we are generally inclined to think poorly of God...as though God is the great cosmic disappointment. Why is that? It’s often because, like Zechariah, our theology... what we think to be true about God...is based upon the outcomes that we have sought from God. When those outcomes do not come to pass, we lose faith that God is listening, that God cares, or perhaps that God is even there at all.

Most people who tell you that they don’t believe in God have a story to illustrate why they don’t believe God is there, and it’s almost always a story of an outcome they longed for that did not come to pass. They prayed for healing, or rescue, or justice...and they perceived that God did nothing. I think it’s safe to say that if Gabriel showed up in their rooms tonight with a personal message and promise from God, their response would be quite similar to Z.’s: “How can I know this?” They have no place in their lives for faith, they want concrete proof.
Notice how the angel Gabriel responds to Zechariah: And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words.” Now that may seem a bit harsh, but let’s think about what we can learn. Zechariah is rebuked and his voice is taken away because he did not believe the promise of God. Why does that earn him a rebuke? The assumed message is simply this: God’s promise is true and trustworthy because God never breaks a promise. His character is without blemish. If God says it, you can take that to the bank. To question God’s promise is to challenge His character, and that leads to a rebuke.

Now, let’s compare what we’ve just observed with our second story, which is similar to the first in that Gabriel appears and announces a miraculous pregnancy and a promise that a child will born. This time the young virgin named Mary is the recipient of God’s promise. Now notice, Mary also responds with a question, but notice the difference in the question. Whereas Z. asked, “How can I know this?”…Mary asks, “How will this be?” In other words, “How will that work…how is that even possible given that I have never been with a man?” Mary is not demanding proof, she is asking for clarity and understanding. Her question assumes the promise will come to pass, she’s simply bewildered as to HOW it could come to pass given her virginity.

She’s asking a good and reasonable question, and she receives no rebuke whatsoever. The angel answers her question, making clear that her pregnancy will come as a result of the Holy Spirit, and consequently her child will be called holy—the Son of God. The angel concludes by informing her of Elizabeth’s pregnancy and assuring her that with God, nothing will be impossible. To which Mary then responds, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary responds with faith in the promise. Now, where does such faith come from? How could this young woman believe in such an incredible and difficult promise from God? Keep in mind, Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying and hoping for a child for decades…the news of a pregnancy was GREAT NEWS, albeit difficult to believe at first. On the contrary, Mary was not praying for a pregnancy. She had recently become engaged to a man named Joseph as arranged by her parents; and the news of her pregnancy prior to her wedding day would bring shame upon her, her family, and Joseph. In fact, it would have been Joseph’s prerogative to press charges against Mary and, in some cases, she could have been stoned for her assumed infidelity. The cost of believing God’s promise was far greater for Mary than it was for Zechariah, and yet Mary submits in faith to the words spoken by God through the angel Gabriel.

To understand where that kind of faith comes from, we must first consider Mary’s worldview. Mary states, “I am the servant of the Lord.” That is a biblical worldview, and it is a significant point we must consider. There is a fundamental difference between seeing yourself as one who
serves God as opposed to one whom God serves. When we cast aside our faith because God does not provide our preferred outcomes, we betray a worldview in which God serves us. If we occupy the center of the universe, then God’s purpose is to provide what we need, to rescue us when we are in trouble, to bless us with abundance, to protect those we love, and to heal our wounds. That is why if God does not serve us well, if He does not meet our needs or desires in a timely fashion, if we perceive that He is indifferent to our demands, we are quick to set God aside as either an inept God or an absentee God.

However, when we adapt a biblical worldview and we understand that God is at the center of the universe, we see ourselves as servants of God, which is an entirely different perspective, right? Those of us who hold to such a worldview understand that our lives serve within the master plan of our Creator. Mary understands the promise of this unexpected pregnancy within the context of God’s promise that “a virgin shall be with child” and that “a child will be born unto us” who will be the Messiah. Her sufferings, shame, and potential death pale in comparison to what God will accomplish through her life, so she’s all in. To see ourselves as servants and agents of God’s master plan is to assume that His will trumps our needs, desires, or any sense of entitlement we may have. Because Mary reveres the One she serves, she is ready to believe the promises of her Lord even when it is costly and difficult to do so. In short, Mary believes that the God she serves is trustworthy, so she places her faith in the promises of God.

Now, as we compare the response of Zechariah and the response of Mary to the promises of God, we can begin to find our place in the text, and that allows us to personalize what we are learning. So let’s make it personal.

First, assuming God exists, are you the kind of person who naturally assumes that God exists to serve you, or that you exist to serve God?

Second, given the promises of God that we find in scripture, are you more likely to demand PROOF in order to KNOW that the promises of God will come to pass, or are you more likely to have faith in the promises of God even when you cannot see immediate results?

The stories that we read this evening provide room for all of us to be where we are, so let that be of some comfort. Some of us are “Mary’s”…faith comes a bit easier because we start with the assumption that we serve God, and God can be trusted. Some of us, like Zechariah, have lived with too many years of disappointment and we have become a bit jaded when it comes to the promises of God. We wish we could believe God, but we’re not convinced. That’s OK…you are where you are, I am where I am, and God’s love is constant for all of us. But there is a fundamental difference in living by faith versus living by sight, and the scriptures would call us to live by faith, and to receive the promises of God like Mary. So if we happen to be a bit more
like Zechariah, or the disciple known as “doubting Thomas,” or Jonah, or Moses, or lots of people who wrestled with faith in God…what are we to do?

I want to quickly point out three things for us all to think about that will hopefully be helpful: 1) the necessity of faith in developing a loving relationship; 2) the double blessing of a promise; and 3) why (I believe) God can be trusted to fulfill His promises.

I. First of all, we won’t learn to trust God, and we won’t learn to love God, if all God does is provide for our every need every moment of the day. In fact, the more regularly and abundantly God provides, the less likely we are to trust Him and to love Him.

Think about it: we don’t manufacture air, it is provided for us to breathe every day. We don’t manufacture water, we gather water from springs that pour forth fresh water almost magically from under the earth. We did not create the seed, but we gather its produce and enjoy the benefit of fruits and vegetables that sustain our living. We did not create the seasons or the sunsets or the great expanse of the sea, but we all benefit from all of these things every day. We did not set our planet just the right distance from the sun, we did not arrange the parts of our bodies, we did not create the laws of physics, and yet we enjoy these dependable, every day realities with hardly a thought. Do all of these constant and abundant provisions lead us to worship God and trust Him? No. In fact, we take these things so for granted that we reason they always have been, they always will be, and that God is not necessary to account for their existence. Ironically, we use the constant, abundant provisions of God as the very argument against the existence of God.

Such is why the poor are so much more likely to live in faith and reliance upon the promises of God. The poor will give praise and glory to God for each meal and the blessings that come, for they take nothing for granted. But the rich…those who live in abundance, will predictably assume such abundance is rightfully theirs…that somehow the wealth and ease they enjoy came as a result of their own intelligence and hard work. Abundance historically leads to atheism.

Such is why it stands to reason that we will get to know and eventually come to love the one we call upon regularly out of our need. If we are never in need, we will not seek or come to appreciate the One who provides for our needs. We all know this is true: We will delight in the one who delivers on a promise just in time far more than the one who provides by default in a mechanical and impersonal way.

As I mentioned last Sunday, God desires a loving, intimate relationship with His creation, and loving relationships always consist of promises and faith in the promises, whether we are talking about the child’s relationship to the parent or those who enter into the bonds of marriage. Faithfulness to a promise is how we learn to love and be loved…that is true in all loving relationships.
II. Remember also that the promise of one who is trustworthy is a double blessing. For example: if I give you a check for $10,000…assuming I am trustworthy and I have the money in my account to cover the check…you will begin to plan, purchase, and celebrate as though you already have the money in hand, when in fact what you have in your hand is my promise. You then will enjoy that blessing all the more when in fact you receive the money when the actual check is cashed.

The writer of Hebrews says that placing our faith in the promises of God is to already enjoy the substance of that which cannot be seen. Take for example the promise of Christmas: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” We have a Savior! That’s God’s promise, and God makes good on His promises. That means that by faith, no matter our circumstances, we can already enjoy the hope, assurance, and joy of our Savior, even though our final “salvation” will come when we enter into His unfettered presence on the other side of this current age. Such is why the Christian is correct in saying, “I was saved; I am being saved, and I will be saved.” The substance of the promise benefits the believer long before the full expression of the promise comes to pass.

Consider what Jesus promises in John 14: that he is going to His Father to prepare a place for us, that we might be with him for all eternity. He states that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and all that place their faith in Him will enter into eternal life and inherit the home that he has prepared for us. That’s a promise, and the substance of that promise is something I can enjoy right now. When everything is breaking down, when we lose our homes due to foreclosure, when we age and all that we once held dear has been stripped away and we find ourselves bound to a wheelchair and eating supper at 4 p.m…the promise of our home in heaven is not pie in the sky…it the substance that sustains us, that helps us to endure to the end with joy and thanksgiving, believing in faith for that which is already true and still yet to come.

III. Finally, God is either trustworthy or He’s not. Some of you believe that He is; others of you are not so sure. That’s OK…you are where you are, and there’s nothing I can say or do to help you bypass your personal journey of faith. I can testify, however, to what I believe to be true with absolute conviction: God can be trusted. His promises are true. And this life works better when we take God at His word and place our faith in Him.

But how can we know that God can be trusted? What proof do we have? That is a fair question for those who have been hurt or disillusioned.

One of my favorite chapters in all of the Bible is Romans 8. If you have time in the next day or two, dust off your Bible and read all of Romans 8…it’s pretty profound. But towards the end of that chapter, there are some words I will leave you with as we make our way home this
evening, and here’s what Paul writes beginning with vs.31, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

How can we know that God will deliver on all of His promises? How can we know that God is trustworthy? How can we know that God will provide? Because “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” is a God who deserves our honor, respect, praise, trust and allegiance. Jesus Christ is all the proof we should ever need that God loves us, that He has…and will always…fulfill His promises. Look now to the child born to a virgin, raised in hardship and poverty, whose short life made the singular greatest impact of any person ever born…He who was perfectly blameless and without sin and yet bore our inequities and was pierced for our transgressions…He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Need we any greater evidence of God’s commitment to love us and keep his promises?

Such extravagant love demands an answer. Such nobility of character and such costly sacrifice deserves our faith and allegiance. How then shall we respond? We shall respond with faith.

I know many of you are hurting tonight, you are even angry with God. But listen to the words of Gabriel: God has heard your prayer. Have you been wondering…have you wrestled with doubt…did you come here tonight on the edge of despair? Listen to me friends: God has heard your prayer. He has heard the hearts-cry of every lost soul plagued with sadness, sin, sickness, and the shadow of death, and He has answered your prayer: He has sent us the Son, His only Son, that we might be saved, that we might enjoy the substance of our salvation even now, and that we might anticipate our salvation when we finally leave this cold earth.

God loves you, and He can be trusted. Repent therefore of your unbelief, place your faith in Jesus who fulfilled every promise God ever made to us, and discover the joy of living in the promise of Christmas!

Let’s pray.