

Luke 1:5-38 – Ageless Advent Questions: How Will This Be?

Last week, we considered the question that we all must ask: Are you the one? Tonight, we consider a question that we all ask: How will this be?

From the very first book of the Bible to the last, from the beginning of time to the end of time, this question is and will be asked. Because the promises of God, the works of God, the ways of God are often beyond our understanding. And so it is wondered: How will this be?

But there are two ways to ask that question. And we heard them both tonight.

Sometimes that question is asked in a doubting, scoffing way. That was how the old priest Zechariah asked the question when the angel Gabriel came to him and told him that he and his barren wife Elizabeth would have a son. No way, he thought. How shall I know this? he asked. That is, How can I be sure? How can that be?

But instead of doubting, Zechariah should have remembered the story of Abraham and Sarah and how God gave them a son in their old age, despite Sarah's barrenness. Had God weakened? What was done in the past could God not do now? But for his disbelief, for spouting off, Zechariah was rewarded with nine months of silence to think about what he said and how he said it! This was not a problem for God if He wanted it to happen. And He did want it. This was the plan. The Messiah was coming and soon! And, therefore, the one who would prepare His way. Your son, Zechariah. All was being fulfilled, by the God who had so promised. Do not doubt but believe, Zechariah.

Sometimes we fall into this trap, too. We know what God has promised, but ... it seems so unlikely. Things seem to be going so badly. It's taking so long. Maybe we don't question whether God can, but if He will. It is Zechariah's unbelief rearing its ugly head in us. To doubt God, think Him unreliable, unfaithful, unable, or unwilling. It's what the devil wants us to think, to pry us away from God; set our faith adrift, so he can send us tumbling down the waterfall of unbelief.

What a blessing Zechariah's muteness was for him. Unable to speak, he could still read and hear and ponder the Scriptures and the Word of God and the faithfulness of God and be strengthened in His faith. For that is why God disciplines – not to harm us but to strengthen us. In Him and His Word. And old Zechariah was. So that when his son was born, and he named him John, as the angel told him to do, when he regained the ability to speak, he bursts forth with the Word of God! Now he remembers the Abraham he should have thought of before ... and David, and the prophets. He proclaims the faithfulness of God, that His promises are now being fulfilled.

Zechariah asked: **How shall I know this?** And God led him into the Word. That's how you know, Zechariah. That's how we know. How we can be sure.

Six months later, that same Gabriel appeared to announce just as unlikely a birth. Not to an old barren woman, but to one at the opposite end of life – a young virgin. This news, too, was difficult to believe, but Mary's response was different than old Zechariah's – her How will this be? was not doubting that it could happen or would happen, it was not asked in scoffing or doubt, but in faith. How will this Word of God be fulfilled? What steps would be taken? How shall she proceed? She knows of what happened to Abraham and the promises made to him, for she mentions him in her praise of God just days later, when she went to see her pregnant-and-now-showing cousin Elizabeth, proclaiming the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His Word.

This is the faith we would have. Faith that doesn't doubt or question God but knows His Word and looks to see how His Word and promises will be fulfilled. That doesn't scoff but waits to be amazed. And the more incredible, the greater the wonder and joy. Perhaps that's why Christmas is just such a season, of such wonder and joy. Because of the greatness of the promise and the way God kept His Word – in a way beyond our understanding, and yet so simple that even children can know it and rejoice. Child-like faith, like Mary.

This is the faith we would have, and that God wants to give us. But it comes only through the Word. For Zechariah, for Mary, for us. It is not something we can cook up in ourselves or do for ourselves. The more you try to do, less you will succeed. Only when, like Zechariah, you are mute and let the Word of God speak to you, does this faith grow in you.

The Word of God like we heard from the prophet Isaiah tonight. Spoken of Christ 700 years before Christ. There were some pretty fantastic words there, of which we might ask: How will this be? Wolves eat lambs, they don't dwell with them. Lions hunt calves, they don't sleep with them. Everyone knows lions eat meat, not straw. And children playing with cobras

is every parent's nightmare, not dream! A world with no hurt or destruction is a world ... well, that's never gonna happen. But Isaiah says it will.

But in his words tonight was something even more fantastic, more wondrous – though maybe a little harder to see. For he said that the one coming from Jesse (the shoot from the stump of Jesse) would also be the one Jesse comes from (the root of Jesse! That is, the root that Jesse grows from.) Well, how can that be? You either come from someone or someone comes from you, but not both! And yet it is both. Because the one Isaiah is talking about is the one who comes both before and after Jesse. According to His divine nature, He is Jesse's source. But according to His human nature, He comes from Jesse. And one is both, when that one is the Son of God made flesh. And if God can do that, and the Son of God establish peace between sinful, rebellious mankind and God, then just maybe He can do peace on earth, too.

And, of course, that is what we celebrate this Advent season and soon the Christmas season. Not the kind of peace on earth that so many of the cards we will receive will say, but peace between God and man. Peace in the forgiveness of our sins. God can, He did, and He is still – still giving the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross to us who need it. To us who doubt. To us who wonder and waiver. To turn our questioning How shall I know this? to a confident Thus says the Lord! To turn our How shall this be? to Mary's Let it be to me according to Your Word.

This Advent season, rejoice in that Word. The Word of promise, the Word fulfilled and the Word now spoken to you. For in that Word is your joy, your confidence, and your peace. For that Word became flesh, for Abraham, for Zechariah, for Mary, and for you.