

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

December 16, 2018

Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39-56

All in the Family: Elizabeth and Zechariah (Jesus' Aunt and Uncle)

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Mary Visits Elizabeth

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Impossible! Simply impossible!

First Mary - she hasn't even been with Joseph yet, and she is pregnant - and it's God's doing!

And now this! Elizabeth and Zechariah, old beyond childbearing years - and she too is pregnant! Simply impossible!

So Mary in the early weeks of her impossible pregnancy goes to visit Elizabeth who is 6 months along in her impossible pregnancy.

Excited and exhausted, and chances are somewhat sick and nauseated, she arrives at the small town and finds her cousin's house. Maybe Elizabeth was resting when she arrived, after all she was 6 months on in a pregnancy that had come very late in life.

The wisdom of that time, as now, would be to rest as much as possible. And even with God's promises to Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son, they must have worried that they could lose this precious baby. Legend has it that she was in her 80's!

Perhaps this is why Elizabeth is overjoyed when, at Mary's unexpected arrival, the child moves sharply within her belly, reassuring her that all is well. And Elizabeth sings! In our Bibles it is printed as prose but her words are actually a poem or an improvisational song. And the theme is blessing. Mary is blessed as is her son.

Elizabeth becomes the most quoted person in the Bible, right after Jesus. Millions recite her words countless times every day, especially if they are Catholic: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

After all when it comes to impossible, Mary's pregnancy out-impossibles Elizabeth's for sure!

Advent is a season of expectancy and new birth. Traditionally, Advent is about Christ's second coming—apocalypse and doom—Christianity's dark side, so to speak. Nevertheless, Christ's return portends dramatic hope—a Judgment Day when all wrongs are made right and all things are made new, a perpetual nativity of heaven and earth, a home in glory land that outshines the sun.

Christians believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, a sure future breaking back into our present, a true destiny determined by God drawing us ever closer to Christ, a love from which nothing can separate us.

And to accomplish this, God taps two overlooked and underestimated women for a redemption project: one a child bride who can be killed if her virginity is even called into question, the other an elderly wife who has failed at her one essential purpose: providing an heir for her husband.

But God's redemption project proved revolutionary: The Lord favors the unfavored. The Lord chooses the unchosen and remembers the forgotten. Those who glut themselves on prestige and riches, on privilege and supremacy and position all get dragged down. God speaks through the mouths of the silenced and shows his might through those deprived of power. God abides in those robbed of standing and worth and tells truth through those least expected to know it.

The Lord moves out of the Temple, out of the palace and the corner office and every high place, descending down the back stairway into women's kitchens, factory floors, laborer's fields and shepherd's caves.

For now, Elizabeth and her cousin, Mary, are the only ones who understand the great things God is doing. Impossible things!

I wonder - what impossibility are you facing? What dead end have you hit? Where have the options seem to have run out? Where do you need a miracle? And what will you do while you wait for it?

I wonder if we might take a page out of Elizabeth's playbook. Because what was promised to her is also promised to us. God has indeed said to us as well, "The deep desire of your heart, the one that is aligned with my will, is not an impossible dream."

So what if we acted "as if"? As if God were already bringing it to fruition? Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah (and Mary, and Joseph for that matter) respond to the announcement and the coming of the Son of God not only with fear, but also with amazement, submission, joy.

All which foreshadow how it will go for the disciples as Jesus spends his 3 yrs. with them 30 yrs. later; and even how he will approach his death on the cross - "Not my will, but thine be done."

And this goes against the ways and language of our culture - which preaches the power of positive thinking and DIY spirituality which keeps us in the driver's seat - steering toward our bliss with the universe as our guide.

But when the emphasis is on our journey and an unknown destination (which will be known only to me when I find it) then there's little of the promises of God who assures us that the "light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it," who shows us that life conquers death - and it is life with Jesus.

Which is what we need to live day in and day out with the worries and fears that we face every day, and in every season of life. We need the Light that cannot be extinguished, especially during our darkest times. Like Elizabeth, when we can only see the end of a long barren road, we need to be assured that impossible is a word that doesn't exist in God's vocabulary.

And when we can submit to God's will, our whole lives are reoriented. We see things through God's eyes. We think about things with God's wisdom. We feel things with God's heart.

Submitting to God for Elizabeth (and for Mary too) was a matter of trusting God, that this thing she had never expected, frightening as it may be - after all being pregnant in your 80's would carry a huge weight of worry - will somehow be a blessing and play a role in serving God's purposes in the world.

And when we can't see beyond the fear and the worry - then all we have is trust. But the one we're trusting is the one who specializes in impossibilities...and unconditional love.

Elizabeth and Mary, while literally pregnant with possibility while impossibility was screaming right at them, knew that they and their futures were in God's hands. These two unlikely women, blessing and praising, mark the beginning of God's great moment in time.

And so they sing! Mary and Elizabeth sing because they have been given more than the babies they carry. They sing because that which nature and the world have named as barren and forbidden is suddenly filled with life - life that will, in its own time, shake the foundations of a world that (for the most part) has absolutely no idea what is going on.

These two women rejoice, and we rejoice with them, for one reason and one reason only: because God loves us and the world enough to act.

That's what we really celebrate at Christmas. That God loves us enough to come to us - to the most barren, the most unnoticed, the least of us - and to plant in us, and in our world, God's own life, God's own hope, and God's own promises of peace.

Christmas - God being born as a person, Jesus - is about the impossible becoming possible. And not just possible, but actually happening for real.

What an encouragement they are to us. And what a relief it is to know that it's not about us; to know that God can and will accomplish His purposes no matter what.

Amen.