

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 17: 15-17
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1: 5-25
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FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“How Can I Be Sure?”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

We all want guarantees that everything will work out for the best and there will be a happy ending. I can do this when it comes to the movies. I absolutely refuse to watch anything without a happy ending. Titanic? Absolutely not. Ship sinks, people die. Not happening. On the odd occasion when I have been tricked and there is a tragedy contained within the story I find I can't get it out of my mind. Life is so full of real tragedies I refuse to subject myself to artificial ones. I'm too empathic, and at least if the situation is real I can pray for the people involved.

Unlike the movies, however, real life is messy and there are no guarantees. I may feel God is guiding me in a new direction, but how can I be sure? How can I know that it is God and not my imagination? How do I discern between my own strong desires and God's will? This is not at all easy to do. And the thing about human nature is even if the evidence is incredibly strong that we're headed in the right direction, we still doubt it!

Zechariah and Elizabeth were getting on in years and had no children. Being childless was considered a great misfortune, and of course it was always blamed on the woman. In such cases some rabbis even went so far as to recommend divorcing the “barren” wife and marrying another in order to have children. Zechariah did not do this. Clearly the couple had prayed for a child for many years, and by the time we meet them had probably given up.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were from the priestly caste living in the hill country around Jerusalem, and because of that he was eligible to serve in the Temple by lot. Many went their whole lives without being chosen. It was a great honor, and the most honored task of all was the burning of the incense that symbolized the prayers of the people rising to God. No one was allowed to perform this more than once. This would have been the most memorable day in Zechariah's life, and it was about to become more so.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Zechariah was startled, and afraid. But the angel told him not to be afraid, and that his prayer had been heard. At this point Zechariah might be excused if he had said, “*What prayer?*” They had been childless for years and may have given up and accepted that it was not God's will for them to have a child.

The angel told him that he and Elizabeth would have a child, and goes on to describe this special child and their instructions for raising him, saying:

- He will be a joy and delight to you.
- Many will rejoice because of his birth.
- He will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.
- He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.
- And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This is an absolutely astounding! Most of us would be scrambling to try to remember it all. Of course, now everyone would grab their phones and hit record. We would expect Zechariah to fall flat on his face and say “Yes, Lord!” After all, Abraham fell facedown. Abraham may have laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” but he didn’t actually have the nerve to question God. But what does Zechariah do? **He actually questions an angel.** In the holy of holies. Zechariah says, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

Now I don’t know how angels think, but if I were the angel Gabriel it might be something along the lines of, “*Dude, seriously?! I’m AN ANGEL. In the HOLY OF HOLIES. Do you think God sends messages like this every day?!*” From what we are told Gabriel’s rebuke was a bit more formal than that. He said, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 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 appointed time.”

The custom of the time was that the priest would not stay too long in the holy place lest the people fear something terrible had happened. And Zechariah was in there much longer than anticipated—long enough for people to get nervous. When he emerged he was mute. The people realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple because he kept making signs to them, but Zechariah remained unable to speak until John was born.

Among the many messages we can take from this story there are two that I would like to focus on today. The first is that God answers prayer. It may not be in the way we expect and it will almost certainly not be in the time frame we expect, but God hears and remembers, even when we forget. The most startling example of this I have seen in my life is the parish my now ex-husband and I served in Dundee. Mid-Craigie was the most depressing public housing estate imaginable. The post-WW II houses looked like grey prison blocks. The playgrounds were cement and graffiti. The people were poor and gangs ruled different areas. There was one bar not even the police went near. And a small group of us prayed, interestingly enough, street by street. We took a map and we prayed for every single street and the people in it. We did this for a few years. Then my marriage collapsed and I ended up back in the states and moved on. About 20 years later I looked on Google earth to see Mid-Craigie. I was shocked. The prison blocks were gone. The great majority have been torn down, replaced by beautiful twin homes, still public housing, but lovely public

housing with gardens and garages. The few blocks of flats that remained were completely transformed. The bar burned down and was never rebuilt. Mid-Craigie is not heaven, but it is no longer hell.

The second message we can take away from this story is that no amount of proof will ever be enough for us. We human beings are just impossible. We SAY we would believe something if an angel came and told us in person, but would we? Judging by Zechariah's response, probably not!

So how can we be sure it's God telling us what to do when angels DO NOT appear in person? First of all, God is not going to tell us to do something that is against scripture. *God told me to rob this bank* does not work. *God told me that it's okay for me to cheat on my spouse because they really don't understand me* is a supreme rationalization. BUT not everything is as clear-cut as this because people do interpret scripture differently. According to theological conservatives I should not be standing here now. I'm female, divorced and queer. What a combination! I shouldn't even exist. So when I felt God's call on my life I confronted these issues head on. I read. I studied. I prayed. And I finally came to different conclusions. I know that the Southern Baptists will never agree with my position, but fortunately the PCUSA now does.

When it comes to divine guidance God is also consistent over time. If God wants us to do something God will put it on our heart not just once, but many times, sometimes over many years. And because of this we can test it to see if it is God's guidance by **saying yes in stages**. God does not give us everything at once. God provides the overall goal, but there are many, many steps along the way. Zechariah's situation was the exception not the rule, and even Zechariah was not given that many specifics.

I felt called to the ministry when I was 18 and a freshman in college. I told NO ONE. I thought God was nuts. Ministry was the last vocation in the world I wanted to do, and all that speaking in public was just not happening. But when I went to Scotland for my Junior year abroad I tested it by trying to take a class at the Seminary, and discovered that the only way I was allowed to take that class was because I was on a particular scholarship. I loved seminary. I transferred and did a joint degree. But I still didn't know about this ministry stuff.

When I ended up divorced and starting over and asked God for direction again I had the same strong sense of call—ministry. I approached the Session of my church who affirmed my call and I went before Presbytery and they affirmed my call! And I STILL wasn't sure about all this preaching stuff. The first job I applied for was as an Assistant Pastor that wouldn't involve a lot of preaching. I ended up not getting it because I was a woman—but that's another long story. God had to literally shut every other door but Penn Wynne before I realized I could do what God called me to do.

When we take one step at a time, circumstances and the wisdom of others will either confirm we are right or things will fall apart. Other people will often recognize we are on the right path, sometimes without even knowing us well. But following God's guidance always involves doing something, and that is

the scary part. If God just said, sit back, it will all happen around you, no problem! But even Zechariah had to raise this child according to God's plan.

God gives us a lot of freedom to make ordinary decisions in our lives. There are many decisions we make that don't have right or wrong answers, just different ones. What I have for dinner tonight does not need to involve intercessory prayer. But big decisions—school, jobs, marriages, moves, all of these we should bring before God and seek guidance. And sometimes, just sometimes, God will come to us with a plan of God's own and lay it on our hearts. Amen.

Genesis 17: 15-17

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

¹⁷ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

Luke 1: 5-25

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

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."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ 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 appointed time.”

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”