

**“THERE WAS JOHN-----THERE WAS JESUS-----
TWO BIRTHS---ONE GOD-----”**

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF LUKE
(1:26-38) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC
ON DECEMBER 20, 2020-----
(THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT)**

**AS MANY OF YOU KNOW, THE BIRTH OF JESUS IS
PARALLELED BY THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE
BAPTIST..... JOHN WAS BORN ABOUT SIX
MONTHS BEFORE JESUS. HIS MOTHER,
ELIZABETH, AND MARY WERE RELATED, MAKING
JOHN AND JESUS SOMETHING ON THE ORDER
OF COUSINS.**

WHEN YOU PUT THE TWO STORIES SIDE BY SIDE, AS LUKE DOES IN THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS OF HIS GOSPEL, YOU FIND SOME REMARKABLE SIMILARITIES. FOR EXAMPLE:

- BOTH BEGIN WITH THE ANGEL GABRIEL ANNOUNCING WHAT GOD INTENDS TO DO;**
- BOTH HAVE TO DO WITH CHILDREN WHO ARE TO PLAY KEY ROLES IN GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION;**
- AND BOTH INVOLVE AN UNLIKELY SET OF PARENTS – ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH WERE OLD AND WELL BEYOND THE AGE OF CHILD-BEARING; JOSEPH AND MARY WEREN'T EVEN MARRIED YET.**

**READING THESE TWO ACCOUNTS, IT'S CLEAR
LUKE WANTS US TO KNOW THESE ARE NO
ORDINARY BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENTS, THEY'RE
THE PREFACE TO GOD'S PLAN TO REDEEM THE
WORLD FROM ITS FALLEN STATE AND
RECONCILE US TO HIMSELF.**

**THIS MORNING, AS WE MAKE OUR FINAL
PREPARATIONS FOR THE COMING OF THE LORD,
I'D LIKE TO GO BACK TO GABRIEL'S
ANNOUNCEMENT CONCERNING THE BIRTH OF
JOHN AND THEN, THE BIRTH OF JESUS, AND, IN
PARTICULAR, I'D LIKE TO PAY CLOSE ATTENTION
TO HOW ZECHARIAH AND MARY RESPONDED.
I'LL TELL YOU WHY IN A MOMENT.**

**FIRST, LET'S REWIND THE TAPE TO LUKE,
CHAPTER ONE, VERSE FIVE, WHERE HE SAYS,
"THERE WAS IN THE DAYS OF HEROD, THE KING
OF JUDEA,
A CERTAIN PRIEST NAMED ZACHARIAS,
OF THE PRIESTLY DIVISION OF ABIJAH.
HE HAD A WIFE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF AARON,
AND HER NAME WAS ELIZABETH" (LUKE 1:5).
LUKE GOES ON TO ASSURE US THAT, NOT ONLY
WERE BOTH ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH FROM
PRIESTLY FAMILIES, THEY WERE RIGHTEOUS
AND BLAMELESS IN GOD'S SIGHT.**

**THEIR ONLY PROBLEM WAS THAT THEY DIDN'T
HAVE ANY CHILDREN. IT WAS ASSUMED THAT
ELIZABETH WAS BARREN.**

**WHEN ZECHARIAH WENT TO THE TEMPLE TO
PERFORM HIS PRIESTLY DUTIES, HE WAS
ASSIGNED THE TASK OF OFFERING INCENSE IN
THE SANCTUARY, AND IT WAS THERE IN THE
HOLY OF HOLIES THAT HE CAME FACE TO FACE
WITH THE ANGEL GABRIEL. NATURALLY, HE
WAS STARTLED. HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO
SAY.**

GABRIEL SAID,

“DON’T BE AFRAID, ZACHARIAS, BECAUSE YOUR

REQUEST HAS BEEN HEARD,

AND YOUR WIFE, ELIZABETH, WILL BEAR YOU A

SON,

AND YOU SHALL CALL HIS NAME JOHN....

HE WILL BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

(AND WITH) THE SPIRIT AND POWER OF

ELIJAH....

(HE WILL) PREPARE A PEOPLE PREPARED FOR

THE LORD.” (LUKE 1:13-17).

IT'S AT THIS POINT THE STORY TAKES AN UNEXPECTED TURN. FOR, GIVEN THE FACT THAT ZECHARIAH IS NOT ONLY A PRIEST, BUT A MEMBER OF THE ROYAL ORDER OF ABIJAH, AND GIVEN THE FACT THAT HE'S RIGHTEOUS AND BLAMELESS IN GOD'S SIGHT – IN OTHER WORDS, THAT HE DOESN'T HAVE ANY REASON TO BE AFRAID – WE MIGHT HAVE EXPECTED HIM TO SHOUT, “HALLELUJAH! PRAISE THE LORD!” AND DO A CARTWHEEL AND SHAKE GABRIEL'S HAND AND SAY, “THANK YOU!” INSTEAD, ZECHARIAH QUESTIONED GABRIEL'S WORD.

HE SAID,

“HOW CAN I BE SURE OF THIS?

FOR I AM AN OLD MAN,

AND MY WIFE IS WELL ADVANCED IN YEARS.”

(LUKE 1:18)

**IN OTHER WORDS, “WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE
YOU?” TO WHICH THE ANGEL GABRIEL SAID,
AND I PARAPHRASE:**

“BECAUSE I’M GABRIEL, THAT’S WHY.

GOD ALMIGHTY SENT ME TO BRING YOU THIS

GOOD NEWS.

**BUT BECAUSE YOU REFUSE TO BELIEVE ME,
YOU'LL REMAIN MUTE AND UNABLE TO SAY A
WORD
UNTIL AFTER THE CHILD IS BORN.”**

(LUKE 1:19-21)

**SURE ENOUGH, WHEN ZECHARIAH CAME OUT OF
THE SANCTUARY AND THE OTHER PRIESTS
ASKED HIM WHAT TOOK HIM SO LONG, HE
COULDN'T MAKE SAY A WORD. ALL HE COULD
DO WAS GRUNT AND POINT AND MAKE
UNINTELLIGIBLE SOUNDS. BEING PRIESTS, THEY
FIGURED HE MUST HAVE HAD SOME SORT OF
VISION, AND THEY SENT HIM HOME.**

**BY CONTRAST, THERE'S THE STORY OF MARY.
ACCORDING TO LUKE,**

**“NOW IN THE SIXTH MONTH (OF ELIZABETH'S
PREGNANCY), THE ANGEL GABRIEL WAS SENT
FROM GOD TO A CITY OF GALILEE, NAMED
NAZARETH, TO A VIRGIN PLEDGED TO BE
MARRIED TO A MAN WHOSE NAME WAS JOSEPH,
OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID. THE VIRGIN'S NAME
WAS MARY” (LUKE 1:26-27).**

**WE DON'T KNOW THIS FOR A FACT, BUT MOST
SCHOLARS BELIEVE MARY WAS NO MORE THAN
A TEENAGER AT THE TIME, POSSIBLY AS YOUNG
AS FOURTEEN YEARS OLD.**

WE LIKE TO BELIEVE SHE GREW UP IN A PIOUS HOME – SOME EVEN BELIEVE THAT, LIKE ELIZABETH AND ZECHARIAH, SHE DESCENDED FROM PRIESTLY FAMILIES – BUT THERE’S NO REAL PROOF OF THAT, EITHER. ALL WE CAN BE SURE OF IS THAT SHE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN WITH LITTLE, OR NO STATUS OR FORMAL EDUCATION.....AT THIS TIME AND PLACE AND IN THIS CULTURE WOMEN AND CHILDREN WERE MOST CERTAINLY SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS---- MOST OFTEN OVERLOOKED ---DISRESPECTED AND EVEN FORGOTTEN.....

YET, THE ANGEL GABRIEL APPEARED OUT OF NOWHERE AND CALLED HER NAME. HE SAID, “REJOICE, YOU HIGHLY FAVORED ONE! THE LORD IS WITH YOU. BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN!” (LUKE 1:28) UNLIKE ZECHARIAH, MARY SAID NOTHING. LUKE SAYS, “SHE WAS GREATLY TROUBLED AT THE SAYING, AND CONSIDERED WHAT KIND OF SALUTATION THIS MIGHT BE.” (LUKE 1:29)

THE ANGEL GABRIEL WENT ON TO TELL HER THAT GOD HAD CHOSEN HER TO CONCEIVE A CHILD AND BEAR A SON, WHO WOULD BE CALLED THE SON OF THE MOST HIGH GOD,

**AND WHO WOULD INHERIT THE THRONE OF
DAVID AND REIGN OVER THE HOUSE OF JACOB
FOREVER. (LUKE 1:30-33)**

**NOW, IT'S TRUE MARY ASKED GABRIEL A
QUESTION. SHE ASKED, "HOW CAN THIS BE,
SEEING I AM A VIRGIN?" (LUKE 1:34) BUT THAT'S
NOT TO SAY SHE QUESTIONED GABRIEL'S
WORD. IT'S WAS A FAIR QUESTION. SHE HAD A
RIGHT TO KNOW. AFTER ALL, IT WAS HER
BODY.**

AND GABRIEL SAID,

**“THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL COME ON YOU,
AND THE POWER OF THE MOST HIGH WILL
OVERSHADOW YOU.**

**THEREFORE ALSO THE HOLY ONE WHO IS BORN
FROM YOU
WILL BE CALLED THE SON OF GOD.” (LUKE 1:35)**

**HERE THE STORY TAKES AN UNEXPECTED
TURN. FOR, GIVEN MARY’S TENDER YOUNG AGE
AND THE FACT THAT SHE’S A WOMAN WHO’S
BEEN APPROACHED BY A MAN COMPLETELY BY
SURPRISE, WE MIGHT EXPECT HER TO CALL FOR
HELP OR RUN FOR HER LIFE. BUT NO.**

**ACCORDING TO LUKE, AFTER GABRIEL TOLD
HER WHAT GOD HAD IN MIND, SHE BOWED HER
HEAD IN SUBMISSION AND SAID,**

**“BEHOLD, THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD;
BE IT TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.”**

(LUKE 1:38)

ONE COMMENTATOR HAS WRITTEN:

***“HAVING TOLD THESE TWO STORIES SO THAT
THEY PROPERLY STAND IN CONTRAST WITH
EACH OTHER, WE ARE IMMEDIATELY TEMPTED
TO LEAP TO JUDGMENT. ‘DON’T BE LIKE
ZECHARIAH!’ WE WOULD LIKE TO SHOUT OUT.
‘BE LIKE MARY.’***

“BUT IT REALLY DOESN’T WORK THAT WAY. IN THE FIRST PLACE, WE ARE ALL QUITE OBVIOUSLY MORE LIKE ZECHARIAH THAN WE ARE LIKE MARY. IN THE SECOND PLACE, WE HAVE NOT AS YET HEARD THE WHOLE STORY OF ZECHARIAH. YES, HE BECAME MUTE. BUT HIS INABILITY TO SPEAK WAS LIMITED IN SCOPE. ONCE THE CHILD WAS BORN, ZECHARIAH GOT IT! HIS TONGUE WAS SET LOOSE AND HE BLESSED GOD IN WONDROUS SONG ... (1:64).

“ZECHARIAH, TOO, COMES TO FAITH IN GOD’S PROMISE! HIS FAITH TIMETABLE IS JUST A LITTLE SLOWER THAN MARY’S! REMINDE YOU OF ANYONE?

SO WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE TODAY IN THIS MESSAGE FROM DR. LUKE-----WELL-----GOD IS THE SPEAKER AND GOD SAYS: I AM A GOD WHO MAKES PROMISES. I AM A GOD WHO KEEPS PROMISES. I MADE A PROMISE TO ZECHARIAH. ZECHARIAH, LIKE MANY OF YOU, WAS SLOW TO BELIEVE. BUT I KEPT MY PROMISE! I MADE A PROMISE TO MARY. SHE GOT IT IMMEDIATELY AND TRUSTED THE WORD OF PROMISE. I KEPT MY PROMISE TO MARY, AS WELL. IN JESUS CHRIST, THE SON TO BE BORN, I MAKE A PROMISE TO YOU. SOME OF YOU WILL GET IT RIGHT AWAY. SOME OF YOU MIGHT PONDER THE MATTER FOR SOME TIME.

**BUT NEVER FEAR. I AM A GOD WHO MAKES
PROMISES. I AM A GOD WHO KEEPS PROMISES. I
WILL KEEP MY CHRIST-PROMISE TO YOU.**

**HERE'S THE SUM OF IT ALL: TWO RESPONSES
AND ONE SOVEREIGN GOD OF GRACE AND
LOVE. OR, TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, GOD IS
FAITHFUL EVEN WHEN WE'RE NOT; GOD IS
PATIENT AND LONG-SUFFERING AND WILLING TO
WAIT AS LONG AS NECESSARY FOR US TO
HONOR HIM AS THE LORD OF OUR LIVES.**

**THIS IS THE GIST OF ONE OF THE MOST
BELOVED PASSAGES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT,
THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON. IT
BEGINS, "A MAN HAD TWO SONS ..."**

AND GOES ON TO TALK ABOUT HOW ONE WAS REBELLIOUS AND UNFAITHFUL AND WENT OFF TO LIVE AMONG THE GENTILES. THE OTHER STAYED WITH HIS FATHER AND WORKED WITHOUT COMPLAINT. BUT WHEN THE PRODIGAL FINALLY HIT BOTTOM AND CAME HOME, HIS TAIL TUCKED BETWEEN HIS LEGS, AS WE SAY, HIS FATHER RUSHED OUT TO GREET HIM WITH OPEN ARMS. HE DRESSED HIM IN HIS FINEST ROBE AND PUT A RING ON HIS FINGER AND SHOES ON HIS FEET. THEN HE ORDERED HIS SERVANT TO KILL THE FATTED CALF AND PREPARE A LAVISH FEAST BECAUSE, AS HE SAID, "THIS, MY SON, WAS LOST AND NOW HE'S FOUND; HE WAS DEAD, BUT NOW HE'S ALIVE!"

WHEN THE OLDER BROTHER HEARD WHAT WAS GOING ON, HE WAS FURIOUS, AND HE SAID TO HIS FATHER, “ALL THESE YEARS I’VE SERVED YOU, AND YOU NEVER PREPARED SO MUCH AS A GOAT FOR ME.”

WITH THAT, HIS FATHER PUT HIS ARM AROUND HIS SHOULDERS AND SAID, “YOU’RE RIGHT. I SHOULD HAVE DONE BETTER. IT’S JUST THAT YOU’RE WITH ME ALWAYS AND ALL THAT I HAVE IS YOURS. I’M SORRY. BUT, DON’T YOU SEE? YOUR BROTHER HAS COME HOME, AND THAT’S REASON TO REJOICE. COME ON, LET’S GO CELEBRATE TOGETHER.” (LUKE 15:11-32)

TWO RESPONSES, ONE SOVEREIGN GOD OF GRACE AND LOVE.

WELL, THIS IS WHAT I HOPE YOU'LL GET OUT OF THE SERMON THIS MORNING: EVEN TODAY, GOD CALLS US AND INVITES US TO BE PART OF HIS KINGDOM. SOMETIMES WE HEAR HIM, SOMETIMES WE DON'T. SOMETIMES WE'RE FAITHFUL AND OBEDIENT AND QUICK TO RESPOND; AND SOMETIMES WE'RE OBSTINATE AND REBELLIOUS AND DON'T WANT TO BE BOTHERED. THROUGH IT ALL, GOD IS FAITHFUL TO US, POURING OUT HIS BLESSINGS OF GRACE AND LOVE, WHETHER WE DESERVE IT OR NOT.

NOWHERE IS THIS MADE CLEARER THAN IN THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST, WHO CAME TO EARTH AS A BABY BORN IN BETHLEHEM, AND WHO GREW UP AS A CARPENTER'S SON IN NAZARETH, AND WHO WENT ON TO DIE ON THE HILL OF GOLGOTHA FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF OUR SINS. HE DIED FOR YOU AND FOR ME THAT WE MIGHT BE RECONCILED TO GOD AND GIVEN THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE.

SO, HOW ARE YOU GOING TO RESPOND TO THAT? LIKE ZECHARIAH – DOUBTFUL AND QUESTIONING? OR LIKE MARY, RECEPTIVE AND HUMBLE?

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER --- AND OF THE
SON----AND OF THE HOLY SPIRT.....AMEN!!!**

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND
FOR ME.....AMEN.....**