

WELCOME 13th December 2020 – 3rd Sunday in Advent '20 B

Luke 1:26-56

Welcome Back! It's great to have the limits lifted & be able to approach something that looks & feels like worship is supposed to this morning. I'm so glad you're here for what feels like an historic day. I pray you experience God's grace in abundance in worship today...maybe in a way you've not ever experienced it ^b/₄. Please check our website for our weekly Zoom Bible Study times & other important information & updates.

As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources right there in your hands. *Special welcome to those who are with us on-line. We want to equip you so God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives & then out into the city to share what God has done for you.* Remember we're still doing a lot of the things we need to do to maintain a level of safety: Hand sanitizer. Masks. Sign in. Distance. Offering. Communion. Thanks to our set-up/clean-up folks!

As we move into this week...Family...When most of us think Christmas...we think family. Together. As many of us as possible...Our Christmas vision, for the most part is linked to those who are extensions of us...bloodline genepool in-laws or outlaws we want 'em there. In good times or bad...when the world is all as it should be or when nothing's quite right...it's family we want near us.

And this year...From coast to coast, the pictures said it all. Flowing tears, screams of joy & lingering hugs filled our airports as families were reunited/reconnected after months of border bans & lockouts. It was an early Christmas gift for many & a chance to extend traditions, create memories, & anchor ourselves in a sense of belonging. And when there's good news to share...we want them to hear it first.

It was no different for Mary when the angel came & told her she'd been chosen to bear God's ultimate miracle to the world. The 1st person she told was an aged auntie who also had been blessed by God ^w/_{an} "impossible" child. Together, they discovered Christmas is more than a family...It's a movement of God's eternal love from generation to generation embracing all nations, connecting all people, & redeeming each moment of life to bring joy, hope & blessing beyond imagination; FOR-EVER. Christmas is the pouring out of God's heart for a struggling dying world to bring it to life fullness & joy. Christmas is the reunion not just of "our mob" but of lives far & near ^w/_{all} things set right – all things made whole – all things brimming ^w/_{peace} & contentment - well-being & justice – once for all time.

We'll explore & experience together that Christmas is more.

Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Lord Jesus, many of us are waiting for you: The war-torn are waiting for peace. The hungry are waiting for food. Refugees are waiting for a homeland. The sick are waiting for healing. We long for your presence, and trust in your promise; we hear your call to turn toward you, to be changed by your Spirit & welcome you in.

Meet us here and fill our minds with your wisdom and our hearts with you, that as we worship, you will create in us your fullness...Come Lord Jesus...Amen.

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. How have the events of this year changed the way you view family?
2. ■ If God could grant you a "personal" miracle right now...What would it be?
I'm not interested in world peace or climate change...for you...

BIBLES

3 Advent '20 B – CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN...A FAMILY

I was just a kid...maybe 10-11 when my cousin Bobby died. He was my dad's brother's son...8-10 years older. We heard the words "drugs" often in relation to Bobby & his sister...& "overdose" was what we were told. I don't remember a lot of the details except a conversation w/ my dad not long after about the "danger & stupidity" of illegal drugs & a vague reference: "You're the last one." He meant I was the last living male Guilfoyle descendant we knew of in our family tree...as far as we know there aren't a lot of branches on our tree. I was the last XY Guilfoyle carrier.

Almost 50 years later I've been around a lot of "last ones." Buried a few. Talking to a dear friend this week about his work colleague who is literally the last of her line. The only child of 2 only children w/ no children of her own. She's it. Her death will be an extinction level event for their genetic line. I suspect some of you understand the weight of how that might feel. Zech & Liz we saw last week were burdened by that realization...they were it save some extended relations...

Mary was somewhat different, but only by degree. Unlike the priestly born Zech/Liz, Mary's a poor teenage girl in an out of the way town in middle-of-nowhere-Judea. Her life is not really her own. She is guarded by the men around her: her father & Joseph. That's not abusive or slavery or anything like that...culturally she had significance & relevance only in relation to those with authority over her. She's almost invisible in her family tree & into the one she will marry until she bears a child. And for the moment, she & Joseph are socially/culturally kept @ a safe sexual distance from each other. She's meant to be invisible.

But into Mary's seemingly tiny unseen insignificant life God intervenes w/ his saving power, love & grace. When God's angel appears to Mary the angel says, "*Greetings favoured woman!*" Every time I read this my heart stops...He speaks to her as if she were royalty. He announces that out of all the women in the world God chooses HER to be the Mother of God's only Son. She alone is to be the bearer of the Spirit-conceived child of God. In HER body she will conceive & bear the Son of the Most High God. Through HER womb she will give birth to the One who is Saviour of the world: a child whose very name means God Saves.

Her reaction? Confused, disturbed, bewildered, perplexed, troubled, shaken, afraid - But notice what she says: "*But how can this happen? I am a virgin.*" I dug deep into some studies this week...because there's always the question about Zech's doubt & Mary's question & why is Zech silenced & Mary blessed...what's the difference? **Bibles**

Well let's look...When Gabriel tells Zech he & Liz are going to have a son Zech asks "*How can I be sure this will happen?*" Scholars say the framing of his question is more of disbelief: "Prove it." He lists the impossibilities age & infirmity that make children a non-starter for them...In Zech's mind it's not even worth arguing. While Mary's reaction is more: "Explain it." Her query is framed around, "I'm in but I'd like to know how. You've got me...help me understand." Zech allowed his life & his faith to be cut short by his circumstances. He allowed his future to be determined by the limits of his own capacities. He has closed the door on their future & it's going to take an angel to kick it down. Mary allowed God to operate in the midst of & beyond her circumstances. Mary opened her life to the power of God to work through her in ways she'd never before even considered.

If God could grant you a "personal" miracle right now...If God were to operate in the midst of & beyond your circumstances...to work through you in ways you never before even considered...to lead you beyond what you consider your limited capacities...Have you closed off the door to the future because you **JUST KNOW**...

God is not offering Mary fame fortune soft beds or silent nights. She doesn't know it yet, but her responsiveness to God will bring her ridicule as an unmarried pregnant girl, the pain of childbirth, & the agony of watching her son stagger beaten & bloody up a hill to die on a cross. Mary was invited to bear a miracle that would save this world & open the broken creation to the Kingdom of God...It would also cost her dearly. If God could grant you a "personal" miracle right now...could be awesome & might be costly...What would you say? Prove it or explain it?

"*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" Which is heart-stoppingly awesome. God is powerful...but that's not exactly what the Bible says. Better trans: "*For no **word** from God will ever fail.*" Better still: *It is not possible for any **word** of God to fail.* Given that assurance...not just of God's power but also his faithfulness to his own word, Mary says: "*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your **word**.*" She quotes the angel back to himself...Since I have God's word I trust his word. She trusts that what God says He will do to do to bring life & hope & salvation to the world through her...can & will take place. God is powerful YES but more than that he is Faithful. To. His. Word...God is trustworthy. God keeps his promises.

The danger we often crash into as followers of Jesus & folks who take the Bible seriously is sometimes we try to claim promises that aren't ours or deny one that is walk on water we weren't called to step out on – hide from a giant we're called to slay...But...we **CAN** claim these assurances & others just like them: "*I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself. – Jer 31:3 I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings. –*

Hos 6:6 If God is for us, who can ever be against us? – Rom 8:31 Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir. – Gal 4:7 By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. – 2:Pet 1:3 Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. – Jn 15:15 God has not given us a spirit of fear & timidity, but of power, love, & self-discipline. – 2 Tim 1:7

Having received God's promise of a child by the power of God's Spirit Mary runs immediately to the home of her relative Liz who is also bearing a child she wasn't dreaming was possible. As Mary enters the house Liz & her unborn John literally jump for joy & are filled with the Holy Spirit. Joy is the undeniable sign of the presence of God...you read "joy" in the Bible you know God's at work. You experience joy in your own life...you know God's at work. Joy is the deep abiding confidence in God even when you don't feel anything or there's nothing to be happy about or you don't fully understand what God is doing right now. Joy expects God's grace & goodness & abundant blessing are just up ahead & rushes to live in that abundance. John jumps in the womb. Liz cries out & blesses Mary & the baby in her ^b/₄ she even knows the whole story. Joy expects God's grace & goodness & abundant blessing are just up ahead & rushes to live in that abundance. Joy lives in victory ^b/₄ the final battle is won.

Then like Zech last week Mary sings... *"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, & from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, & he has done great things for me. He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud & haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones & exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things & sent the rich away with empty hands. He has helped his servant Israel & remembered to be merciful. For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham & his children forever."* Liz & her baby & then Mary are grasped by the magnitude of God's work in them. They were in the presence of the world's redemption.

Together, they discovered Christmas is more than a family...It's a movement of God's eternal love from generation to generation embracing all nations, connecting all people, & redeeming each moment of life to bring joy, hope & blessing beyond imagination; FOR-EVER. Christmas is the pouring out of God's heart for a struggling dying world to bring it to life fullness & joy. Christmas is the reunion not just of "our mob" but of lives far & near w/ all things set right – all things made whole – all things brimming w/ peace & contentment - well-being & justice – once for all time.

We may be holding off 11-12 more days to actually celebrate Christmas...but God isn't waiting. God is, at this very moment, at work reconciling & redeeming healing restoring all things even on those days when everything we see & feel seems to

argue against it. And God invites us, urges us, to be people who live by faith - to risk believing God's promises & allow hope to give birth to real joy. Not only are we invited, urged, to be people who dare to live in a hope that gives birth to joy, we are also called to so pour that joy out everywhere we go in this dark world that others might see & also dare to believe.

All around us this holiday season are people who have allowed something in their circumstances to close off the future...to depress their hearts...to rob them of life & vitality & hope & peace...steal their joy to sink their contentment...But we have been called to be the light of the world in these dark days. We have been both called & filled shine the light of Jesus' love, hope & joy into the lives of those who see nothing but darkness/death.

When Jesus dies/rises/claims us in baptism, buries us w/ him & raises us to new life in him we are *"blessed with every spiritual blessing...given everything we need for life & godliness ...conquerors & co-heirs with Christ...dwelling place of God's Spirit...new creation...chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people of God's own possession to proclaim the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."*

We are in on the great mystery & joy of Christmas...that movement of God's eternal unending everlasting love from generation to generation embracing all nations, connecting all people, & redeeming each moment of life to bring joy, hope & blessing beyond imagination; FOR-EVER...that pouring out of God's heart for a struggling dying world to bring it to life fullness & joy...that reunion not just of "our mob" but of lives far & near w/ all things set right – all things made whole – all things brimming w/ peace & contentment - well-being & justice – once for all time.

Let's pray w/ that in mind: **Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word. Amen.**