

"The Heart of the Question"

Text: Luke 1:13-15, 18-20, 26-38

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in. (TLH 647 v.3)

Dear Fellow Servants, you who have Christ, and therefore lack nothing:

Sometimes, maybe *most* times, we miss the significance of the most important moments in our lives because those moments tend to arrive so gently, so quietly – without fanfare or introduction. The "sameness" of our day to day lives masks the import of those pivotal moments, and it's usually only after time has passed that we can recognize those essential moments for what they were.

Maybe it's because we don't tend to live in the moment. We routinely miss the present because we're always looking forward to the "What's next?" We seldom, if ever, pause long enough to consider just how blessed we are *right now*.

Our text for this morning tells of a time when two individuals, a man and a woman, were suddenly confronted with one of those moments, with events that would forever change not only their lives but the lives of all humanity. We will find, when we hear their stories, two very different reactions. From those two very different reactions we will seek to gain invaluable insights.

Our study this morning centers around the moment God's greatest promise was fulfilled, the moment when God's plan for man's salvation was first announced. That moment, that event, is recorded in the Gospel of Luke, the First Chapter:

^{ESV} **Luke 1:13-15, 18-20, 26-38 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord...¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time..."**
²⁶ ¶ **In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city**

of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy--the Son of God. ³⁶ ¶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

So far the very words of our God, given to mankind through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Each time we are reminded of the origin of these words, their true value is (and ought to be) magnified in our hearts and minds. To prepare ourselves for the study of these words, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

Our text first introduces us to a devout man named Zechariah, who is faithfully serving in the temple. For a couple thousand years men had been doing exactly what Zechariah was doing. Over and over again they offered the prescribed sacrifices, burned the prescribed incense, and placed the prescribed bread on the appropriate table. It is inconceivable that such actions hadn't become routine to the point of thoughtlessness. Year after year, decade after decade, century after century men like Zechariah carried out their prescribed duties, until one day one of those countless servants is visited by God's holy messenger. Because of the sameness of what he was doing, Zechariah failed to fully appreciate both the irony and the import of that moment. You and I have no such excuse.

The importance of this event is that that visit to Zechariah was it – it was the first public announcement from God himself that the time of

fulfillment was finally at hand. That great event, eagerly anticipated since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, had finally arrived. The earth shattering, civilization altering, "this changes everything" event was first announced at that precise moment. This is the event where God first announced that his plan to save mankind had been set into motion. The time to send the Messiah had arrived.

That's the *importance* of this event. The *irony* of this great moment is, first of all, that the promise of the long-awaited New Covenant was given there among the symbols of the Old. An Old Testament priest with his incense burner working in the place of daily sacrifices was there told that the time of the Great Sacrifice and of the New Covenant had finally arrived, and that its arrival would actually make obsolete everything that he had and his predecessors had been doing since that first Tabernacle was erected by Moses and Aaron in the wilderness of Sinai.

Yet that was not the only irony here. Note also what exactly the reaction was of this righteous, God-fearing, Promise-believing priest when he received the news that would forever alter the course of world events and usher in a new relationship between God and mankind. He simply couldn't believe it, even though it was announced to him, personally and directly, by the Archangel of God. Why would a righteous man not immediately embrace the news, leap for joy, and then run out and tell everyone he knew?

In part because human beings routinely "miss the moment," but also because human beings seem to have a much easier time with promises that are abstract and impersonal – with promises whose fulfillment lies in the distant future and therefore apply mostly to others. In a sense then we actually have a much more difficult time recognizing the *fulfillment* and *personal application* of God's promises than we do in believing in promises that are more vague, impersonal, and upcoming. We tend to believe that "too good to be true" things can and do happen to others. It is much harder when *we* are the recipients.

Is this you? Don't you find it easy to agree that **"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not charging their sins to them"** when you think in terms of "the world," or to other devout Christians, but then find it much more difficult to say, "God was in Christ, reconciling me to himself, not charging my sins to my own spiritual account"? How much easier to say "God forgives sins for Jesus' sake" than it is to say "God has forgiven my sin of _____ (fill in the blank – theft, adultery, lust, bad language, hatred, coveting) for Jesus' sake." Easier to believe that "God loves sinners" than to imagine that "God loves me." Yet for the first to be

true, the second must also be true. If God loves sinners, he must also therefore love *me*.

Zechariah believed that God would send a Savior, but that confidence just seemed to fall apart when he became involved. His confidence was shaken when he ran, head-first, into the wall of his own reason. The "reason" problem was that he and his wife were too old to have a child. Sounds kind of silly to us, in this context, doesn't it? The fact is that Zechariah wouldn't even be alive to hear the angel's message if God couldn't arrange for old people to have babies. Zechariah undoubtedly knew the story of his ancestor Abraham, who was also given a son long after the normal time for such things had passed. Doubting the word of an angel is silly enough in itself; how much more to doubt the word of an angel foretelling what he knew had happened before. To put it another way, Zechariah believed that the Promise would one day be fulfilled, believed that he was talking to an angel, believed that a similar old-age birth had once taken place, but came to doubt the angel's message the instant he himself became involved.

So it was that Zechariah asked his question of Gabriel: **"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."** Gabriel was not gentle in his reply: **"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."** No matter how predictable or reasonable (from our perspective) was Zechariah's question, the Archangel of God condemned him. Yet his condemnation wasn't based on the question itself but on the heart of the question. In other words, simply asking the question wasn't the problem; the problem was that Zechariah's question was born of doubt or denial. The problem was Zechariah's heart.

Compare Zechariah's response to the other event recorded in our text – the announcement by the same Archangel to Mary that she was going to give birth to the Son of God and Savior of the world. The normal, *expected* skepticism of Zechariah should have been magnified ten-fold in Mary. Where Zechariah had been told that something *that had happened before* was going to happen again (an elderly couple was going to have a baby) what the Angel told Mary *had never happened*. Not only had a human mother never given birth to the Son of God, a virgin had never before given birth to a child. Humanly speaking then, what Gabriel announced to Mary was doubly impossible.

So Mary too asked her question of Gabriel: **"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"** If you and I didn't already know the story, we would naturally anticipate that Gabriel would give the same sort of response that he had given Zechariah. Only he doesn't. Instead he explains: **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy--the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."**

Note well. No rebuke, no condemnation, no divine penalty. Why? Why was Gabriel's reply so different when both questioned his word? Because the heart of Mary's question was not doubt but faith. She did not wonder *if* what the Angel was telling her was or would be true, she asked only how it was going to happen. We know this, in part, because of her final statement to the Angel: **"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."**

This is the heart you and I want, *always*, but especially when we question God about his promises. There our God doesn't always expect us to grasp the how, but he does expect us to trust him to fully keep every one of his promises to us. There are and will be times in every one of our lives when we simply cannot see how God can possibly fulfill his promises to us, like his promise to provide for all of our material needs when our focus is on kingdom work, or his promise that he will never leave us when he seems to be so far away. So also it is not wrong to wonder *how* God, for example, can work saving faith in the heart of an infant through the waters of baptism, so long as we do not deny that he can and does. There is no condemnation in wondering *how* we can be receiving his true body and blood in Holy Communion when we do not doubt that we can and do. Nothing sinful about wondering *how* God can work so powerfully in our hearts and lives just by hearing his Word, when we nonetheless believe that he does just that.

God grant to each of us *that* sort of heart – hearts that believe what we cannot fully understand, hearts that also accept, in every way, the profound truth spoken by God's own Angel: **"For nothing will be impossible with God."** We have no reason to doubt this assertion. We not only have God's Word on it, we have countless examples of this very thing in our lives, beginning with God's plan to rescue us from our impossible sin problem, and extending to so many other lesser problems in our lives. God give us then hearts that trust him. Truly *trust* him – for forgiveness, for preservation, for life. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Micah 5:2-5a** But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace.

^{ESV} **Hebrews 10:5-10** Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" ⁸ When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

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The Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 20, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 66 (Red Hymnal)

"Hark the Glad Sound, the Savior Comes"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson (Micah 5:2-5a) When all of the prophecies concerning the Promised Messiah are assembled from throughout the Old Testament, the picture that is drawn is strikingly precise and unambiguous. Mankind could and should have known a great deal about Jesus long before he was ever born. In this lesson mankind was even told the city of his birth. Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 100 (Page 35)

The Second Lesson: (Hebrews 10:5-10) It takes some thought and concentration to follow the inspired truth of our second reading, but it is obviously well worth the effort. The Book of Hebrews is masterful when it comes to explaining just how the entire Old Testament, with all of its prescribed rules and sacrifices, all pointed always and only to Jesus Christ. Here we are taught that since "burnt offerings and sacrifices" could not pay for sins, Jesus removed any need to continue those sacrifices when he offered himself as the perfect, final sacrifice for man's sin.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15 (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 65 (Verses 1-2, 5) (Red Hymnal)

"When Sinners See Their Lost Condition"

The Sermon – Text: Luke 1:13-15, 18-20, 26-38 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"The Heart of the Question"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 55 (Red Hymnal)

"Come, Thou Precious Ransom, Come"

The Offering (Hymn 89 Verses 1 & 5)

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -65 (Verse 6) (Red Hymnal)

"When Sinners See Their Lost Condition"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Sunday (38) Average (47) Wednesday (32) Organ Fund (\$4,600)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -9:00 a.m. | – Christmas Eve Rehearsal |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Sunday Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Coffee/Fellowship Time |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Choir Practice |
| Thursday | -5:00 p.m. | – Christmas Eve Service |
| Friday | -10:00 a.m. | – Christmas Day Service |
| Next Sunday | – No Sunday School or Bible Class | |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Sunday Worship w/communion |
| | -11:30 a.m. | – Coffee/Fellowship Time |

CLC News – Pastor Mark Weiss has returned the call to Mt. Zion of Detroit. Gethsemane of Spokane has called Pastor Wayne Eichstadt.

Organ Fund – Our current organ continues to develop problems on almost a weekly basis. Please consider contributing to the newly established Organ Fund so that a replacement instrument can be purchased as soon as possible.

Annual Voters Meeting Notes – Mark Johnson and Brian Fettig were reelected to the Church Council. The Voters authorized the Church Council to purchase either a Phoenix or Johannus organ at a cost not to exceed \$26,000. Guidelines for Weddings, Memorial Services, and Baptisms were received and approved. Copies are available by request from the Church Council. The 2016 Budget was approved, which includes a 1.2% increase over last year. Our FY17 Cooperative Budget Plan estimate (CLC contribution) was increased to \$13,750. The 2016 Council is scheduled to be installed on December 27.

This Week's Schedule – Please note that there are no Confirmation or Bible Classes scheduled for this week. Both resume on December 30th. The time for our Christmas Eve service has been moved to 5pm, followed by our Christmas Day service at 10am on Friday morning.