

December 2023

Belton Joyner, Jr - *Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series*

December 3 - Text: Luke 1:5-23 **"The Holy Spirit and Zechariah"**

After I read this week's focal text (Luke 1:5-23), these five reflections emerged.

(1) Zechariah was at work (v. 8) when he was visited by God's messenger. We don't usually expect God to show up in the ordinary places of our lives. Daily routines. Daily duties. How would my work day be different if I considered the possibility that something that happened there was a message from God?

(2) An angel (Gabriel) showed up to speak to Zechariah (v. 11). That's not the only way God speaks to us. The word "angel" means "God's messenger," so I am left to wonder if there are angels in my life that I ignore because I do not recognize them. Who are those in my life who seek to bring me a word from God?

(3) When Zechariah saw the angel, he was terrified (v. 12). He was expecting the news to be bad (v. 18) But, the news was good! Have I ever been so sure that things would go poorly that I missed it when things went well? God is able to make great gifts of grace even when we are convinced that all blessing is lost. God's "good" does not always look like what we think of as "good."

December 10 - Text: Luke 1:26-38 **"The Holy Spirit and Mary"**

By now you are probably asking yourself, "Good Gracious, is it Christmas already?" Our surprise about the closeness of the days ahead is pretty mild compared to what Mary must have felt when the angel told her she was going to have a baby! (Luke 1:31)

When was the last time you were surprised by something God did in your life? Maybe it was the healing of a broken relationship. Maybe it was a call to a special ministry. Maybe it was the emergence of friendship in what had been a lonely place. Maybe it was the unexpected gift of peace in a funeral service. Maybe it was the joy you had in feeding the homeless. God ain't through with surprising us!

Isaiah 55:11 reminds us that God's word "shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Mary's response (Luke 1:38) confirms this truth because she said "let me be with me according to your word." Her willingness to bear this mystery Child is a sign that God was indeed at work in all of this.

See the title of this week's lesson. Look back at the title of last week's lesson. Sneak a look ahead at the title of the studies for the rest of this month. The human factor varies from week to week, but there is one constant: the Holy Spirit. It is God's abiding presence that makes all of this good news possible.

December 17 - Text: Luke 1:24-25, 39-45 **"The Holy Spirit and Elizabeth"**

Ask someone to name key biblical figures in this season's stories. You'll hear: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, angels, shepherds, wise men, inn keeper. You are not likely to hear "Elizabeth."

Luke begins his account of the coming of our Lord by telling about Elizabeth (Luke 1:5). Elizabeth had figured she would not have any children (v. 7), but got the surprising news that she would indeed have a child (v. 13). She remained in seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy (v. 24). Then Mary showed up (vv. 39-40). And, as they say, "The rest is history."

In a sense, Jesus came to visit Elizabeth; albeit, He was still in His mother's womb, but He was there. This reflection got me to wondering: Have I missed a visit by Jesus because I did not recognize Him? (Elizabeth and her unborn child recognized Who was visiting - v. 44.)

If Jesus comes as a needy person, would I recognize Him? If Jesus came and asked me to join Him in a social justice protest, would I recognize Him? If Jesus came and asked me to write a check for the church's mission project, would I recognize Him?

The focal text says that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 41). Maybe that is why she was able to understand the visit by Mary. As we have seen over the recent weeks of study, the presence of the Holy Spirit expresses itself in a variety of ways. Interestingly, Zechariah was at work at the temple; Mary was at her home, and Elizabeth was at her home when the Spirit spoke to them. The Spirit is not limited to the temple as a place to reach out to people.

(4) Oh, my! There are consequences when we do not heed God's word (v. 20). Zechariah goes mute. God calls for love and we do not love. There are consequences. God calls for justice and we are unjust. There are consequences. God calls for outreach and we care only for self. There are consequences.

(5) When the account continues, Zechariah goes home (v. 23). Even after a high-moment encounter with God, we are expected to live out the harvest in the ups and downs of daily life. After a journey to the spiritual mountaintop, we go back home and live out that truth in the place of our usual context.

God was not through with Zechariah. In the verses that follow our study text, Zechariah gets his voice back (Luke 1:64) and he used that gift to praise God. How do I praise God?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Leaders Eat Last* (Portfolio/Penguin), Simon Sinek wrote: "Leaders are the ones who run headfirst into the unknown...Leaders would sooner sacrifice what is theirs to save what is ours..."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Are you looking for me, Lord? Help me to recognize Your presence..."

What God is doing in our midst can be mystifying. Mary was "perplexed" by the way the angel greeted her (Luke 1:28-29). We may be comfortable when God is going about business as usual, but when God is doing a new thing, we join Mary in being perplexed. In fact, if, from time to time I do not wonder "What in the world is going on...what does this mean" - I may be missing something new that God is doing.

Mary had questions (vv. 29, 34), but that was okay with God's messenger (the angel). Mary continued the dialogue until she said "Yes." Is God waiting for my "Yes"?

Isn't it just like God to show up in some unlikely place (v. 26)? We best stay spiritually alert. It may be God who shows up at the door.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Jonathan Augustine (*Meditations for Advent*, Duke Divinity School) has written: "We should all share Mary's excitement...Ending food scarcities, undoing systemic racism, and achieving gender equality are all possible with God. Indeed, all things are possible with God."

Prayer

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come, Holy Spirit..."

When we read further in Luke's account, we recognize that Elizabeth's child was John, the Baptist (vv. 57-60; 3:2). Elizabeth (and we) hardly knew what God was unfolding, but God had a plan. God often plants a seed for us to care for. Even if I do not grasp the full meaning at the beginning, I am called upon by God to nourish and grow the seed that God may plant in my journey.

What would "Elizabeth" recognize in my life if I went to visit her?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Bill Leonard (*Baptist Questions, Baptist Answers*, Westminster John Knox) wrote: "The Holy Spirit also is at work in the world; it is the stealth presence of God moving in places and persons that often the world (and church) do not recognize immediately, if ever."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "I am listening, Lord, for Your holy presence..."

December 24 - Text: Luke 1:46-55
“Mary’s Response to the Holy Spirit”

When I was in seminary - at Drew University about two hundred years ago - almost every evening during the week I would go to the chapel for evening prayer. Part of the ritual for that service was singing the Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55. At first, I wondered “Why do we sing this every time we get together?” Then, it dawned on me: This was Mary’s summary of key themes in the Gospel.

I have a New Testament edition that footnotes every biblical passage that draws from or alludes to another biblical text. For just these ten verses (Luke 1:46-55), there are twenty-nine such references, all from the Old Testament. Blessed Mother Mary knew that this mission of her son was a continuation and fulfillment of what had been going on “from generation to generation.”

For example, compare 1 Samuel 2:1 with what Mary sang in Luke 1:47. Compare Psalm 138:6 with Luke 1:48. Compare Job 5:11 with Luke 1:52. It is clear to Mary that this is a consistent God who began this work long ago.

There is a stuffed animal named Snoopy Bear who has lived with a member of our family for more than fifty years. S. Bear (as he calls himself) has an excuse almost every Sunday for not going to church. If there is Communion, he will not go because (he says) “I was taught not to eat in the sanctuary.” He will not go during the Christmas season or the Easter season, because he does not want people to think he is a “C & E Christian.” I don’t want to scare S. Bear away from church, but do you think I should tell him that this Advent hymn of Mary’s is true all year long?

December 31 - Text: Luke 1:67-80
“Zechariah’s Response to the Spirit”

Do you remember what happened to Zechariah just a few months ago? He had been struck speechless, totally mute, because he doubted when the angel Gabriel told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a baby (Luke 1:13, 18, 20). Now that the child has been born, Zechariah and Elizabeth go to get the infant circumcised (v. 59). Finally, the leaders asked him what the child’s name would be. When Zechariah wrote “John,” he had now accepted this birth and celebrated it. He began speaking aloud again. This week’s focal text is what he said (Luke 1:67-80).

The key to understanding what Zechariah said is to understand that his prophecy was inspired by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:67). The Spirit led him to see the ministry would unfold for this one whom we came to call “John, the Baptist.”

What a way to end the year 2023! We close these days with a text that talks about a good tomorrow. That is a word that we need to hear. We may not know the details of 2024, but we know the One who is in charge. One way to put it is to say that Zechariah saw a good future even though he did not know what would be the shoe size of his son, soon to be an adult. We do not have the specifics of how 2024 will unfold, but we do know that there is “the tender mercy of our God” (Luke 1:74).

As I typed that last sentence, I made a typographical error. (Imagine that!) I saw that “tender” had been misspelled. I made a right click on my

Some of us have the same problem as Snoopy Bear. It may not be finding excuses for not going to church; it may be finding excuses for not making personal decisions by the values of Jesus; it may be convincing ourselves that religion is for the individual with no regard for community life; it may be living with a faith that goes to church on Sunday but does not live out Church during the week. I think this week’s text is for me as well as for S. Bear.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Everyday Matters* (Abingdon), Gregory Jones quotes Dorothy Jean Weaver: “The world that Jesus Emmanuel comes to is rather the real world...It is this world and none other into which God comes to be with us in the person of Jesus, the defenseless child and the crucified Messiah.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Lord Jesus, into my daily life, and bring the grace of Your love...”

computer mouse and the correct spelling appeared. One more click of the mouse and correct spelling was restored. I wish it were that easy to get God’s will for correcting my failures. Instead of the click of a computer mouse, I have been given the life of Jesus Christ. Zechariah’s son, John, prepared the way and pointed ahead to the coming Messiah. Now I need to look to that One, being open to the Holy Spirit. It may not unfold as I figure it should; that’s what Zechariah found out. God’s plan is bigger than my limited view, but the promise is light for those who dwell in darkness (v. 79).

Happy New Year!

What Someone Else Has Said:

William B. Lawrence has written (*When the Church Woke*, Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock): “Yet, the risen Christ offers peace and bestows power so the church can overcome fear and fulfill its purpose. As the texts from the writers of the four Gospels make clear, the church comes to life and is sent into the world.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Lord, Jesus, into the new year that Your peace may live among us...”