

## The Faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth

**Luke 1:11& 12** *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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 give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*

In researching this series of devotionals I looked up the definition of faith. One dictionary defines faith as "a firm belief in something for which there is no proof", or "complete trust". Have you given much thought to what faith really means to you? Have you looked into your heart and soul and examined what you have faith in? Is it a person, a group of people, or an object? Is it faith in God? It can be an interesting spiritual exercise to examine yourself in this manner. Something to do, for instance, before you kneel at the communion rail.

Anyone who has ever "tried" to have a baby can relate to what Zechariah and Elizabeth went through. In biblical times, having a child, especially a Son was a really big deal. It gave you an heir to pass on your legacy to. Someone to carry-on the family business or to follow in your footsteps. Without an heir you were viewed as incomplete. Zechariah and Elizabeth were old in years. Apparently well beyond the normal age for bearing children. Yet their faith in God kept them in prayer. They kept praying for a child. They left the matter in the hands of the Lord and prayed that they would be given a child. They had come to the end of themselves. They had done all that they could do. Luke 1:1-11 relates the relative spiritual state of Zechariah and Elizabeth as "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. Yet, despite all their human efforts, they were childless. And placing their "complete trust" in the Lord, their faith saw them through. For they were told they would be given a Son. Does this mean that if you pray for something long enough, and fervently enough, that your prayers will also be answered? No, that is not the case. For when we pray for things we want, for "our will"

to be done we know what is going to be the answer. It is when we pray for ""Thy will be done" that we show where our faith really stands. For in praying for God's will to be done, we surrender ourselves to God's purpose. We lay down our own pride and submit to the will of God. And that my friends is what faith is all about. When our purposes align with the will of God, we experience a sense of satisfaction. But I wonder, at times, if I am seeking God to align his will with mine so that what I think needs to be done will be accomplished. How is it with your life? Let's commit to praying first for God's will to be done. After all, isn't that what faith is all about?

**PRAYER:** Father, we come before you in prayer, humble and without pride. We thank You for all the blessing You have poured out upon us. We thank You for the gift of grace, our faith poured into us by Your Spirit and the gift of Your Son. We put our faith in You O'Lord. We ask that Your will be done in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## The Faith of Mary

**Luke 1:34-38** *“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.*

Our modern world seems to be fixated on following the saga of famous people who have been unfaithful to their marriage vows. Media outlets everywhere splash headlines heralding the latest updates in what is at best a sad situation. Whether it is an elected official, a television/movie star or a famous sports figure it is all the same. Big font - bold type news of the latest twist in the story of promises broken and lives shattered. Someone in the saga is the black hat (villain) and someone is the white hat (the victim). Eventually the headlines tell the tale of an ugly divorce (not sure if there is a pretty one) and lots of money changing hands in the settlement.

Every time I read this passage in the bible, I have to pause to consider what Mary experienced in this encounter with the Angel. And consider what she knew could be her future, all be it a potentially short and painful future. To gather additional information on what could have happened to Mary, you can read Matthew chapter 1. Society in those times, was not so forgiving as society today. By some accounts, Joseph could have exposed Mary’s pregnancy and had her stoned. People living in today’s world are really fortunate. And yet, knowing she could be stoned, Mary put her faith in God. Her words are beyond description as to the depth of her faith in God. “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be as you have said.” WOW! This blows me away every time I read it! We all say we have faith in God. We all say we trust that God will protect us from harm. How many of us can say this with the conviction of Mary? How many of us could face what Mary was facing, and still maintain that same conviction? Friends, where there is faith, there is doubt. Doubt is like a small crack in a rock. If allowed to grow over time the small crack can eventually cause the rock to break apart. I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul who said “I believe, help me with my unbelief.” Even in the strongest believer doubt exists that has to be acknowledged and prayerfully managed. Please, do not mistake my admiration for Mary’s faith for worshipping Mary. She was an ordinary person that God chose to fulfill his will. Someone just like you and I. Someone who has been given the gift of faith through the Holy Spirit.

While we can all strive for the faith of Mary we must recognize we are human and prone to doubt. Let us celebrate with Mary, our victory over doubt through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Let us pray that in times of testing, small and large, that our faith in the Lord will be at least as strong as Mary’s.

**PRAYER.** Almighty God, in times of testing your servant can become weak and afraid. Our faith can waver and falter. We ask that your Holy Spirit is with us strongly in our times of trial. We believe, help us with our unbelief. Amen

## The Faith of Joseph

**Matthew 1:19-25** *His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Have you ever had a dream that was so real that you woke up wondering if it had been a dream or reality? The phrase "pinch me I must be dreaming" applies to those surrealistic situations. Dreams, are said, to be a window into the soul. Freud made a fairly big deal out of analyzing dreams. But what do our dreams tell us about ourselves? I do not know about you, but I think I will sleep on it and then make up my mind. :-)

The story of Joseph is an interesting one. We do not read much about him after the birth of Jesus. And yet, he is a key player in the Advent saga. Joseph was a "righteous" man. What does righteous mean? A dictionary will tell you that righteous is acting in accord with divine or moral law. To be free from guilt or sin. But in looking into the situation of Joseph we find more than righteousness at work. We find compassion in huge quantities. While he could expose Mary, he was going to chose not to. But what changed his mind, an Angel. In the case of Mary, her encounter with an Angel happened while she was awake. In the case of Joseph, he encountered the Angel in a dream. Each received directions from God through an Angel. Is there a philosophical question that could

be asked? Who had the stronger faith, Mary or Joseph? I do not have that answer. But I do have a question for you. How does God speak to you? Some may say "I only do what the voices inside my head tell me to do." But really friends of the Savior, how does God speak to you? Is there a healthy prayer life as an integral part of your worship? Are your prayers short, hurried, easily distracted? Do you have a dedicated time of daily study of the Word? And finally, are there times in your daily life where you are still and are open to the voice of God reaching into your soul? Too often friends, our conversations with God are one way in nature. We talk, God listens. But God is always there, speaking to us. And it is very important that we are listening. Joseph lived a life where he could discern the voice of God, even in a dream. That is the level of faith I can find in the life of Joseph. I really wish I had that kind of faith. How about you? What will it take for God to reach into your life and clearly communicate His will to you? We should examine carefully and prayerfully the barriers we are placing in our lives that keep God from reaching us. And prayerfully ask God's help in removing those same barriers so that His will is know and lived in our lives.

**PRAYER:** Most Merciful God, we seek Your help today in our lives. We have carefully crafted an existence that we are comfortable with. We fill our lives with business and noise and distractions. We are son wrong. We are so lost. Help us, dear Lord, to tear down those barriers we have erected. Help us to clear our minds, our ears, and our hearts. Help us to know Your will and live our lives in fulfilling that will. This we ask in the name of Your most precious Son, Jesus. Amen

## The Faith of the Wisemen

**Matthew 2:1-2 & 9-11** *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

When was the last time you took a long distance and or long duration trip. For people with one or more young children this can be substituted for a weekend away with the kids in Salt Lake City or Boise. For couples, or single people with no kids it needs to be a week or more and thousands of miles away. Do you remember how difficult it was to pack for the trip? Trying to figure out how many of each necessity you had to bring. Then there is the work of arranging flights, connections, lodging. Lots and lots of hassles. Not many rewards unless you count frequent flyer miles as a reward for the torture endured in a cramped airline seat. Somebody should make a reality TV show about being a road warrior in modern times. I know this to be true from my own experience. Really friends, there is no place like home.

What in the world would compel three very smart guys to leave the comfort of their home, travel hundreds or even thousands of miles through lands where thieves, and bandits were common place just to see a baby? When you look at what the three Wisemen from the Matthew passage above, that is essentially what they did. Travel in biblical times was at best hazardous. Literally the path from point A to point B was filled with peril. There were bandits to take your possessions and your life. The trails, if there were trails were by no means like our interstate highways of today. The maps, if there were any, were not filled with locations of rest stops. More often

than not, it was by word of mouth or legend that one heard about an oasis somewhere along the route that you could possibly stop at. Navigation was by the stars, and not by your favorite GPS voice telling you to turn left in ¼ of a mile. And comfortable seats were not normally found on camels, horses, or donkeys of the day. That is the tip of the iceberg of what travel was like for the Wisemen. And yet because of the faith in what they believed, they came. They came because a star in the sky told them that the King of the Jews was to be born somewhere to the west of where they lived. How far away this was, they did not know. And this event was so important to them that they wanted to see and worship the new born king so badly that they risked their lives to do so! This is like going to extremes by traveling to the South Pole to watch an eclipse in modern times. The only difference is the importance of what will be seen when arriving. The King of the Jews far and away eclipses the eclipse. (No pun intended or delivered.) I can say one thing for the Wisemen. At least they stopped and asked directions in Jerusalem along the way. Unusual for guys wouldn't you say? Must be why they were called Wise- men.

But really, what can we draw out from the lessons of the faith of the Wisemen. We at Grace have a church. People have in the past, continue to today and will in the future, seek the King of the Jews at Grace. We are truly blessed by what God has given us. And we hold precious the awesome responsibility our Lord has placed upon us. We have been commissioned by our Lord to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and

teaching them his commandments. We have been directed to make Grace a warm, welcoming, inviting place. A home-away-from-home for the weary, the lost and the oppressed. We are to give them comfort. For when they show up at our door, just as the Wisemen did long ago, they are seeking the King of the Jews and we need to make sure that he is seen in all that we are, all that we do and all that we say. Let our lives shine brightly as the star of Bethlehem to those seeking Jesus. That dear friends of the Savior is the faith lesson for us from the faith of the Wisemen.

**PRAYER:** Lord God, Heavenly Father. The journey of the Wisemen of old holds many lessons for us today. Help us to make welcome those who come to Grace Pocatello seeking Your Grace. Help us to help them find You in all that we are and all that we do. Help us at Grace to be the shining star in Your galaxy that guides many to a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ. These things we humbly ask in the name of you Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

## The Faith of the Shepherds

**Luke 2:8-18** *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*

Rumors, rumors, and more rumors. We all hear them. It is part of our everyday life. We receive rumors as passed through word of mouth. We have rumors passed through e-mail or Facebook, or Twitter. Or we even can catch them by just looking at the cover of the tabloids while standing in the checkout line at the market. Rumors are everywhere. But what is the truth in the rumors we hear or see? I sometimes wonder why rumors spread the way they do. It seems, if the rumor tears down someone, that it travels faster than the speed of light. But if a rumor elevates someone, then it takes forever to reach us and it may not have as much credibility as the destructive rumor. What is your experience with rumors? And more importantly, if a rumor tears someone down, does it stop spreading when it reaches you?

Shepherd jokes are big in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Seldom are the jokes nice. They stereotype shepherders in a negative light as far as intelligence and character. What if a shepherder walked up to you and said "an Angel of the Lord appeared before me. The glory of the Lord shone about me." Would you believe him? If not,

then I ask you why not? Unfortunately our prejudices taint how we see people, and the message they are delivering. It is all part of that frail human and sinful nature we have ingrained within us. That is how we are wired. And we struggle every day, minute and second with that. We, sooner or later come to accept that we alone cannot change us. We reach out to God for the help we must have to make that fundamental change. We get down on our knees and pray and pray and then we pray some more. And when our prayers are answered, then what do we do? We pray some more, because our human condition is still there waiting to jump out again.

My worry is what am I missing? What is God trying to tell me through someone I do not recognize as a noted theologian, minister or preacher of the Word? What message is God trying to get through my thick skull via an ordinary run-of-the-mill person? What lesson or kernel of profound wisdom am I being given if I will only grasp it? God does not have a "typical" message deliverer that he always uses to deliver his thoughts, words, wisdom, messages, etc. He uses ordinary people like you and I. He gives them the message and through their faith, they deliver that message. Sometimes they do not even know they are the messenger. And he gives us the discernment to separate the wheat from the chaff in our harvesting of information on a day-to-day basis.

He gives us Pastors to help us pick the pearls of wisdom. And he gives us his Word to use as a standard to measure the messages against. But what do we do with what we are given. We need to follow the example of the shepherds and “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.”

I wonder what would have happened if the shepherds had gone back to their flocks and never told another soul about what they had seen? Every single believer has an important role in sharing the good news of the Gospel with all they encounter. You and I are not excluded. And just like the shepherds, we will encounter people who are amazed at what we tell them about what a loving God we have. They will be amazed at the wonder of the life awaiting them when they decide to make their own journey to see the new born baby who has become the Savior to all mankind.

Spread the word because the love of God that came down on that first Christmas day, and continues to do so every day of the year. Spread the news until the whole world hears!

**PRAYER:** Our Father in heaven. You have given us Your Son. Your precious Son as our Savior. Help us to share the good news. Give us the hearts of the shepherds of long ago. Instill in us a heart for people that moves us to reach out to the lost. Let our humble words sound like the sweet music of a heavenly choir to all who hear. Let the words from our mouths be pleasing in Your sight O’Lord. In Jesus name we pray this. Amen