

Bethlehem

Today marks the final Sunday of Advent. Christmas is coming! We'll have a traditional Christmas Eve candlelight service of song, praise, Scripture reading, and celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The music starts at 8:30 – bring your friends and family. It's one of the most beautiful worship services of the year!

Something we heard from the prophet Micah this morning was the location of Jesus' birth. Micah states, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me One who will be Ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times," (5:2). Micah wrote that down roughly 700 years before the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. God does awesome stuff, especially when common, ordinary people like you and me listen to Him, and decide to believe the promises He makes in Scripture – and then let Him use us to fulfill His purposes.

That's the gist of what we're going to think about today. Let's look at an example of God's promises, and the willingness of people to believe in His promises, from Luke's Gospel. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 1:26-45. **Read Luke 1:26-45.**

Promise of a Child

Promises can be great things – until one breaks them. But God's promises are powerful. His word never fails. And He never breaks His promises. God's promises hold the weight of expectation, hope, and trust. In our Gospel lesson this morning, I count something like eight specific promises God makes which in some way, shape, or form, impact the lives of two remarkable women – Elizabeth and Mary. Both those ladies' lives were changed forever by the promises of God.

Luke writes, "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary," (Luke 1:26-27). Now, there's one promise, about Elizabeth, couched in our introduction to Mary. The specifics of Elizabeth's promise is found later, in verse 36. There, the angel Gabriel tells Mary, "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month."

In the Bible, over and over – especially in the Old Testament – there is a recurring theme of infertility. Specifically, women being unable to produce offspring, usually for an important Bible hero. You read about Zechariah the priest and Elizabeth being old. She's beyond the age of child bearing – and when we know our Bible stories – our minds go way back to Genesis, to Abraham and Sarah. God promised them a son, who would produce offspring as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the night sky. Or Jacob and his two wives, Leah and Rachel. He adored Rachel, but she had a terrible time trying to conceive. Her older sister, Leah, wasn't even the wife Jacob wanted, but from the Bible account, it seems that anytime she was even in the room with Jacob she was getting pregnant!

Promise of God's Favor

Or Elkanah and Hannah, the parents of Samuel. Hannah couldn't conceive, she prays, and God gives her a son, who she gives back to God in service at the tabernacle. Samuel would grow up to be a priest, and the last Judge of Israel – and would anoint the first two kings – Saul and David. All these were promises God made, and fulfilled. These women were way too old to have a baby, Sarah was 100. But God takes what's impossible for us, and makes those impossible things happen. And so, Elizabeth conceived, and we know she gave birth to John the Baptist.

Anyhow, we see some other promises here. “The angel went to Mary and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be,” (verses 28-29). “Highly favored.” “The Lord is with you.” Two promises. She's highly favored by God – what a gift! And God is with her – and us – that's really an amazing promise. That the God who put the stars and planets into motion would be mindful of us, is shocking, it's incredible – unbelievable to think that a Being so vastly greater than us would see us in our situation collectively, and individually, and would put Himself into our game.

Gabriel clarifies things for Mary. “Don't be afraid, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a Son, and you are to call Him Jesus,” (verses 30-31). The promise of Mary conceiving is promise number four by my count. Next we have some promises about Jesus. “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His kingdom will never end,” (verses 32-33). In Gabriel's statement about Jesus there are four promises. He will be great. He will be called the Son of God. God will give Him the throne of David, and His reign and kingdom will last forever.

God's Promises Exceed Our Understanding

Mary's initial reaction to the angel's message is one of confusion and wonder. "How will this be," Mary asked, "since I am a virgin?" (verse 34). A virgin birth defies logic and natural law. It doesn't make sense. Yet Gabriel's response points to the power of God. "The Holy Spirit will come on 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... For no word from God will ever fail," (verses 35, 37).

God's promises often exceed our ability to understand. They remind us that His ways are higher than our ways. He tells us this in Isaiah 55:8-9: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" God's promises are anchored in His faithfulness!

Mary's response to the angel is a model of faith and submission. "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled," (Luke 1:38). Despite the potential for shame, judgment, and even being stoned to death – that's what they did in those days to women who were caught in adultery – Mary chose to trust God's promises to her. After the angel's visit, Mary hurries to see Elizabeth, who is also experiencing the fulfillment of God's promise. When Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She exclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child you will bear! Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!" (verses 42-43, 45).

God's Promise of Redemption and Restoration

The interaction between Mary and Elizabeth highlights the joy that comes with trusting God's promises. It also underscores – and some of our wider church family need to hear this today – the importance of community and mutual encouragement. We have people in our church family who haven't been physically present with us in worship since before the pandemic – and I'm not talking about our shut-ins. I'm talking about the able-bodied folks that we know, who used to sit with us in this sanctuary, who are prioritizing other things over being physically, emotionally, and spiritually present with us on a regular basis.

They're going through things in life, but they're making the choice that they'd rather go it alone, instead of going through the valleys with the community surrounding them. We all make choices, don't we? When we choose to share our journey of faith with others, we strengthen each other and celebrate the faithfulness of God together. Joy and confirmation are multiplied in the context of community – just like Mary and Elizabeth experienced.

Let's be clear here. The promises to Mary and Elizabeth aren't isolated events. They are part of God's broad plan of redeeming the whole world. Mary's Child, Jesus, is the promised Messiah, foretold by prophets – including Micah and Isaiah. Elizabeth's son, John, prepares the way for the Lord. God is always faithful, even when we are not! And God's promises are not only for our individual benefit, but they serve His greater purposes of salvation and restoration. When we trust in His promises, we participate in His divine plan and bring glory to His name.

God-Bearers

In the ancient Greek language which the Bible was first recorded in, and in the ancient church, Mary was referred to as "Theotokos." It's a word that literally means "God-bearer." She birthed Emmanuel – God-with-us – into the world. Sometimes as Methodists, and Protestants, generally speaking, we get hung up and a little uncomfortable on this. The point to get from this is that she was willing to do what God called her to do, even to the point of facing death. Momentarily we'll go outside to see, sing, and remember God coming into our world on the first Christmas long ago, as we reenact the Nativity scene together in the courtyard.

If God called us – and He does – would we believe His promises the way Mary did? Would we be "God-bearers" as we worked and walked as His disciples in the world? We are called to be God-bearers – to be overwhelmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Can you imagine how powerful an expression of our faith it would be for each person who claims to be Christian to truly, fully yield themselves completely to the will of God?

It would be world-changing. It would be us saying that there's room for the Savior to be born among us. We would make room for Him. In fact, we would literally become the room. We would be a visible sign to the whole world that God is present. This is the real promise here. Our response is vital, God says. Our work is central to the working out of His kingdom. But we don't do it alone. Micah tells us our Savior stands and feeds the flock, while the angel tells Mary explicitly that, "the Lord is with you."

Prayer: Shepherd of Israel, You gently support the one who is with child, and call forth the Lamb of God from the waters of the virgin's womb. Stir our hearts to recognize Christ's coming, as Elizabeth recognized the promise of His presence in Mary's radiant obedience to Your desire, and open our souls to receive the One who came to love Your flock. Amen.