

Sunday December 24, 2023

First Lesson: Proverbs 3:5-6

Gospel Lesson: Luke 1: 26-38

Sermon Series: Questions that Move Mountains...How will this Be?

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- We are in week 7 of an 8 -week sermon series called “Questions that Move Mountains?” This is a sermon series that invites us to unpack the questions that Jesus either asked or inspired; with the hope that our repeating First Lesson of Focus ; Proverbs 3: 5-6 that says to *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.*In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths; will take root into our hearts.
- This week the question that we are unpacking to continue our Advent season is Mary’s question to the to the angel Gabrielle **How will this be? Or**

## **our translation today frames the question; How can this Be?**

- Before unpacking this question, I would like to talk a little bit more about the fourth candle that we just lit, **the candle of love**; for I suspect that this candle will help us to answer this question more fully.
- The lighting of the fourth candle symbolizes the embodiment of love as a central theme of the Advent season.
- This love is often understood in the Christian context as the divine love of God, as exemplified by the birth of Jesus Christ.
- It serves as a reminder of the love that God has for humanity and the love that people are called to share with one another.
- Furthermore, it is in the lighting of the fourth candle that ties together the themes represented by the preceding candles—hope, peace, and joy.

- Love is seen as the culmination of these virtues, bringing them together in a harmonious and meaningful way.
- It underscores the interconnectedness of these qualities in the Christian understanding of the Advent season.
- So it is in this defining moment, that we dive into our story this morning.
- Beginning with the scriptural and traditional aspect of where our story is coming from;
- As our Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Class pointed out, **Gabriel**, is the same angel that had foretold to Zechariah the birth of John the Baptist, but now in our story today, Gabriel is announcing to Mary the birth of Jesus.
- This announcement took place **in the sixth month** after Zechariah's vision.
- For my aspiring biblical scholars, you may also find it interesting to learn that this is the only passage

which indicates that John was six months older than Jesus.

- The central character of our story Mary was living in a **city of Galilee, named Nazareth**.
- This expression is found only in Luke and fits in with the fact that he was writing to Gentiles unfamiliar with Palestine.
- The angel Gabriel was sent from God **to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph** (v. 27).
- The interval between engagement and marriage was commonly a year, during which the bride lived with her friends.
- Another interesting biblical fact; it was the bride's property that was vested in her future husband, and unfaithfulness on her part was punished, like adultery, with death.
- Verse 27 of our story tells us that Joseph was **of the house of David**.

- Since Jesus was the legal, though not actual, son of Joseph, this made Him the “son of David”—a title which is given Him a number of times in the Gospels.
- It is also probable that He was a blood descendant of David through Mary His mother.
- And here is where the story really begins in verse 28; the angel suddenly appeared to Mary, as he had done to Zechariah, and greeted her with the words: **Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.**”
- Another interesting fact; The Roman Catholic hymn, *Ave Maria* (“Hail, Mary”), dating in its present form from the sixteenth century, is based on this verse.
- Mary’s response to this news was quite naturally, **troubled**—in fact the translation would indicate that Mary was “greatly troubled,” a stronger word than in verse 29—in which she immediately began to

**cast in her mind** (“considered” or “reasoned”)  
**what manner of salutation this might be**; that is,  
“what it might signify.”

- Mary did not have long to wait for the angel cushioned the coming shock with the same comforting words he had used with Zechariah (v. 13: **Fear not**; which literally means to, “stop being afraid”....now that is a Word from the Lord!
- Then came the shattering announcement—to a pure virgin—of verse 31. The son to be born to her would be **great, and shall be called** (“shall be”) **the Son of the Most High** (v. 32)
- The question Mary asked in reply (v. 34) was inevitable....”**How will this be....or How can this be?**; the question of our sermonic focus this morning.
- For the thing the angel had announced was biologically impossible.

- However the major takeaway for Mary, and Zechariah then and for us now to consider is this idea that **theology is above and beyond biology**.
- For the answer which the angel gave (v. 35) is simple, clear and beautiful.
- The Holy Spirit would take the place of the human father.
- The language here is reminiscent of Genesis 1:2—“and the Spirit of God was brooding upon the face of the waters”.
- It was altogether fitting that the Holy Spirit, who was the active Agent in the original creation, would thus inaugurate a New Creation, the Christ of God.
- For the virgin birth is clearly presented here as an act of divine creation.
- However, in the humanness of it all, as beautiful as this story sounds...the question still arises in the mystery of it all for me and possible for many others.... **How will this be?**

- Stepping out of this scene, our Wednesday Night Class had a lot of meaningful dialogue around this question, How can this be?
- For this is the question that ultimately keeps a lot of us up at night I would imagine.
- For instance, one of my ministry colleague's daughter just discovered that she has brain cancer and admittedly I am still numb by this news.
- For there is a 10 year age difference between myself and my colleague's daughter in which I am the oldest.
- She is a beautiful singer, mother and more.
- If I am honest, her diagnosis just isn't making sense to me or any of us in the Wichita community and beyond...at all.
- She will be having surgery on Thursday....
- Judging from her social media posts, it is clear that she is understandably frightened beyond belief—



- All who knows and love her is praying for a successful surgery and for the healing of her body...
- To be only 34 years old...it just doesn't make sense.....**How can this be?**
- From a Church perspective, many pastors and leaders are assessing what I would soberingly name to be an uncertain budget/pledge season for many— including our church as well.
- For the Church as a whole is facing what I would call a new era of a reformation that is still revealing itself to us all.
- One of my colleagues who is an aspiring Church historian named how every five hundred years or so, the Church goes through a reformation process.
- So I would like to take us all on a historian trip to roughly 500 years ago for just a moment...

- 500 years ago, not only were the people like Mary and Zechariah asking the question of the Church..**How can this be?**
- Interestingly enough, it appears that perhaps a great number of people came to their own conclusions in which there was a spark of discontent.
- For if we were to imagine ourselves in the 16th-century Europe—I stopped by to name that it was a time of religious turmoil, political unrest, and spiritual hunger....sound familiar?
- The church, as it was known, had become entangled in corruption, and the purity of the Gospel seemed obscured.
- In the midst of this darkness, a spark ignited the flame of discontent—a monk named Martin Luther.
- In 1517, Luther, with a heart aflame for truth, posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church.

- This document was a **call to dialogue, a challenge to the prevailing practices of the church**, and a plea for a return to the essence of the Gospel.
- It was an act that would reverberate through time, **setting in motion the winds of change.**
- One of the foundational principles that emerged from the Reformation was "Sola Scriptura"—Scripture alone.
- The reformers, inspired by a renewed understanding of the Bible, **sought to strip away layers of tradition that had obscured the simplicity and purity of God's Word.**
- As Luther delved into the Scriptures, he discovered the transformative power of God's grace—a grace freely given, not earned through works.
- This revelation challenged the prevailing notion of salvation through indulgences and sacraments,

pointing to a radical truth: salvation is a gift from God.

- Now I would be remiss if I did not name that Luther's teachings challenged the traditional authority of the Catholic Church.
- For he argued for the authority of Scripture over the teachings and traditions of the Church, emphasizing "Sola Scriptura" (Scripture alone) as a foundational principle of faith.
- This challenged the hierarchical structure of the Church, where the Pope and Church traditions held significant sway.
- Luther's emphasis on faith as the sole means of justification challenged established beliefs and practices, leading to accusations of heresy.
- Luther's teachings had profound political and social implications, contributing to the fragmentation of the Roman Catholic Church and the rise of Protestantism.

- If you are still hanging out with me in this sermon... congratulations....for I believe that this little history lesson is important for the Church of today.
- For in listening to this sermon, whether you resonated with the story of my 34 year old friend with brain cancer...asking **how can this be;**
- Or whether you may be a parishioner of the Church looking at our future asking the question...**how this can be?**
- **There are powerful lessons to be learned from our story today in which two key learnings immediately are jumping from our story for me to share although I am sure there are more.**
- And that is **number one**, found in verse 30, when the angel Gabriel said to Mary; “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God;
- The first piece of good news that I believe we need to hold space in our hearts both individually and collectively as we continue to wrestle with this

question...**how can this be**— is that **God has found favor in God's heart for all of us.**

- You see Church family, God's favor is not a fleeting emotion or a conditional response.
- It is the undeserved, unmerited, and unconditional love that God showers upon humanity.
- Furthermore, the foundation of God's favor lies in God's character.
- Our Creator is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Psalm 86:15).
- God's favor is an outpouring of God's divine nature.
- Thereby making the million dollar question, how does one access this type of favor?
- To experience God's favor, we must anchor ourselves in faith and trust.
- As we cultivate a deep and abiding trust in God, God's favor becomes a guiding force in our lives.

- In times of joy and sorrow, we must trust that God's favor is ever-present.
- This Church family is the essence behind our continuous first lesson of study in Proverbs 3:5-6;
- **To understand that** we will not always if seldom ever will have all of the answers;
- **To understand that** often in life there is going to be a mystery that we cannot solve;
- **To understand that** there is and always will be a fallacy to even the data and logic that as human beings we will ever be able to produce;
- I don't care how gifted someone may be,
- How many degrees someone may have,
- How much money someone may acquire,
- How many people we may know,
- There is a finiteness to our human capacity that many of us will have to reckon with;

- Glancing at our gospel one last time, I believe this is the same consideration that Mary too had to reckon with;
- To consider that although she could not completely perceive how any of this was going to occur...
- Mary had a decision to make on that day...will she place her faith and trust in the agent of God that was standing before her?
- As a reader and listener of the story, we know what Mary chooses...
- For this is where I am suggesting **the second powerful lesson** that Mary teaches us as people of today who may be asking the question, **How can this be?**
- For we find it in Mary's response to the angel in verse 38 where she "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; **let it be** with me according to your word."
- You see Church family, Mary teaches us all how we begin to exercise this faith and trust in God and



that is by recognizing that at some point in our lives we need to learn how to **let it be**.

- This reminds me of a powerful story that one of our classmates shared on Wednesday night about how her life has been transformed the day she was no longer able to drive herself around anymore.
- I thank God for whom I consider to be a cherished friend and parishioner of our Church, to share such a vulnerable story with us.
- For it was in her sharing, that I believe the entire group stood still because of the transparency of it all;
- I personally was moved by the humility of it all, for this strong woman yielding to this idea that essentially she was in a time of her life where she had to **let it be**....
- For she expressed that there was a time where she would have been frustrated if she did not arrive to places at the time that she wanted to.

- Now she has learned to place her trust in the process of allowing others to care for her.
- The beauty of it all is that she shared that not only is she getting to the places she is wanting to go, I sensed a spirit of liberation that she is experiencing in just letting things be and letting things flow!
- **This Church family is the ultimate message that I believe that God whose favor is upon our Church family both individually and collectively wants us to consider as we experience the fullness of Advent and all of it's possibilities.**
- God is inviting us Church family to **let it be...so that God can be!**
- For I stopped by to proclaim that there is profound wisdom in the simple yet powerful act of **letting it be so that God can be.**

- **Letting it be** does not mean giving up or resigning ourselves to fate; rather, it is an act of surrendering our will to the higher wisdom of God.
- **Letting it be** is an acknowledgment that God's ways are higher than our ways, and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).
- **Letting it be** is an invitation for God to take the lead in our lives, guiding us on a path of righteousness and fulfillment.
- **When we let it be**, we make room for God's divine intervention in our lives.
- **When we let it be**, we make an active choice to release the grip of fear, doubt, and self-reliance.
- **When we let it be Church Family**, we make room for God's grace, God's favor, and God's blessings to come forth fully in our loves.
- I know it's not always easy...but by faith **sometimes we need to let it be...**

- I know things may feel uncertain....but as a people of love we must **let it be....**
- In the meantime while we are waiting for things to be we must keep serving, keep praying, keep worshipping, keep believing, keep hoping, keep trusting, keep loving...oh never stop loving ....
- **For we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to God's purpose...**
- Which means that we can place our assurance in **letting it be...so that God can be...**
- For God has great plans for us both individually and collectively...plans for welfare and not for evil, plans that gives us all a future and hope!
- Let this favored Beloved Community say Amen and Hallelujah!
- Let us join in our sermon response:

**SERMON RESPONSE:**

**Let this candle, a sign of our love, show that we can be restored,**

our faith restored, our strength restored, our confidence restored, our joy restored,  
**as we watch and wait with all God's people for the promise to be fulfilled.**

