

Make Ready a People **Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80**

Good News that is too good to be true!

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which is the first day of the Christian year. Happy New Year! We normally begin the new year anticipating that something good will happen in the year to come. We hope that this year will be better than the last. Think of what kind of good news you would like to hear on the first day of the new year. Imagine that this is New Year's Day and you've just turned on your TV. What good news do you expect or want to hear? Maybe news of the end to the Ukraine war! Or Maybe that inflation is going down, the economy is getting better and the stock market is going up! Sounds great! What about new medical technology that can cure your diabetes or cancer and it's free for everyone?! Imagine that you are watching the news, and the news anchor has just delivered a message that from now on, the government will pay all your medical bills without increasing taxes at all! What would you say? Hallelujah! But we also know that life is not that simple. We are mature enough to know, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Perhaps Zechariah was just like us, and did not believe the good news he heard from the angel. Zechariah was a priest. He and his wife, Elizabeth, lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could not conceive, and now they were quite old. We all know that in the ancient world, having descendants to continue your bloodline was important, but they didn't have a child and they were old. They were good people but life was not always favorable for them.

As a priest, Zachariah went to the temple for a week twice a year to carry out his priestly duties before God. It was just another day at the temple for Zechariah. It was his priestly duty to make sure everything was done properly and in good order. Surprisingly he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of God. Only selected priests were allowed into the sanctuary of the temple once a year. While the congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple, he entered the sanctuary of God and burned incense. Then, what happened? Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. His ordinary day turned into something quite different when an angel showed up at the altar. Zachariah was paralyzed in fear.

"The angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God."(13-15) This sounds like great news! Zachariah and Elizabeth must have prayed for a child for years and he just got assurance that they would get what they wanted! Plus, the angel said, his son would achieve great stature with God! What a blessing!

But Zechariah must have been wise enough to know that "if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is." Zachariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman." He didn't have to be a doctor to know this. He knew that having a child at their age was not possible and so the angel's news sounded too good to be true.

Our Experience and Belief Limits Us!

His past experience and the belief system he created in the past limited him from accepting the good news from the angel, Gabriel. We are not so different from him are we? Have you heard about "The Sand Flea Experiment?" In the experiment, scientists placed a large

number of sand fleas in a glass jar. Of course, the sand fleas quickly jumped out. The scientists then put the fleas back into the jar and placed a lid over the top for a few days. Naturally, as the fleas jumped, they hit the lid and quickly learned the confines of the jar. After just a few days, the fleas became so conditioned to ¹the presence of the lid that they began jumping slightly below it, so as not to ever reach the lid. Then the scientist removed the lid, and guess what happened? The fleas continued to limit themselves to jumping just below the height of the lid, even after the lid was removed...and even after they were removed from the jar and set free! By using this experiment as an analogy, Debbie Steinbock tried to show how our beliefs limit us. Our past and the beliefs that we created in past situations often limit us.

Let me ask a few questions. I know that Asbury UMC is very good at serving our neighbors in need. Food for the soul and food collection for Holliman school, mittens and hats for those in need. So, do you think a world without poverty and hunger is possible? We've been praying for peace in Ukraine. Do you believe a world without war is possible? We erect memorials for school shooting victims and pray for them. Do you really believe a world without guns is possible? Maybe those issues sound too large, so let me go smaller scale. Do you believe our church can regrow and become a full-time church again? We believe it, but it's also true that our beliefs are often conditioned by our past, especially by negative experiences.

What if Gabriel showed up right behind me here (I know it sounds a little spooky), but... he just showed up here on the altar of our sanctuary and said, "Dear Asburians! Your prayer has been heard. You will turn many sons and daughters in Warwick back to their God! You will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents of children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—you'll get the people ready for God." What would your response be? Just like Zachariah, some of us may say, "Do you expect me to believe this?" Maybe some of us would say, "But I am old!" "But I am new to this church!" or "But I'm not good enough" or "But I am just one person! what can one person do?" The word "But" may be the lid of the jar that limits us. How can we break the "But"-lid that confines us?

Hope Break the Jar that Limit our belief

The answer is the hope that comes from God! Beaten down by repeated disappointment, Zechariah gave up his hope for a child and in his despair, he didn't believe the good news the angel proclaimed. He might have said, "that sounds good. But I am old! Do you expect me to believe this?" To Zechariah's incredulous "but I am old," Gabriel answered, "but I am Gabriel! the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news." Gabriel was breaking through Zechariah's "but-lid" and setting him free from despair. He announced good news that was about to change his life and the whole history of humanity! God didn't expect Zechariah to break through the lid that limited him himself, rather, the good news from God battered the lid he had built and set him free. This good news Gabriel proclaimed, sounds odd, but the heart of the gospel we all are called to proclaim, also sounds strange. Doesn't it? God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten Son! What an odd message! Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again! What a strange idea! But we are called to proclaim the good news, the news that sounds too good to be true. Anna Carter Florence, a preaching professor, said, the heart of the gospel is "the unbelievable word that always sounds more than a little crazy when you take it seriously." The good news is that something good is about to happen and it is not your doing, but what God is doing!

¹ <https://mindfulfamilymedicine.com/are-you-living-like-a-sand-flea-how-our-beliefs-limit-us/>

The appearance of the angel signals that this is an extraordinary story of divine events and yet it is set in the midst of very ordinary people. Something wonderful is about to happen among us. It is hope we can have even in the midst of despair! Martin Luther King, Jr said, “We must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope!” God still loves the world and still works for us. With that hope, we can continue to carry out what we are called to do, loving our neighbors and even our enemies. We can sow love where there is hatred and hope where there is despair; light where there is darkness; and joy, where there is sadness!”

Don’t let your past and present situations limit you. Don’t say “but I am old. I am too weak, or “I am not worthy.” Zechariah was old. He was weak. He didn’t even believe the good news he heard. But God still gave him a son, John, the Baptist who made people ready for Jesus.

Like Zechariah, we’ve just heard the good news and we can make a difference if we accept the good news. No matter how insignificant our contribution seems to be, God can use us for his wonderful plan. God is calling us to become a people ready to be messengers of hope through our words and actions. Can we do this mission? Yes. With the hope God places in us, we can do it.

[show a feather] Do you know what this is? It is a feather, maybe an angels’ feather. Angels are sometimes portrayed in the scriptures, and certainly in religious art throughout history, as having wings. Just as angels are symbols of God’s messages to us, as God’s presence with us, feathers symbolize the Spirit of God, the ability to span any distance between heaven and earth, and the freedom of flight to new heights in our lives as we claim God’s possibilities for our lives and for our world. As you leave the sanctuary, please take a feather and place this feather some place where you will be reminded to keep your eyes open to God’s messengers in your life and also God’s power to be messengers of hope in the midst of each day, in encounters with each person you meet.” During this season of Advent, with hope, expect great things from God and continue to be God’s messengers of hope! Amen.