

“Believing the Good News”

Introduction: Though it gets us ahead of things for just a moment, it’s worth noting that the first words of Jesus’ public ministry were these: “The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk. 1:15). Last week, as we looked at how Mark began his account of this good news, we said that he chose this term, “good news” or “gospel,” because it referred in his day to a life-changing event. What Mark and the other three gospel writers reveal is how life-changing the event of the arrival of Jesus truly is, how God, in his Son, the Messiah, has come to complete the story of Israel and provide the last chapter of his blueprint to redeem and restore our world. We also saw how we get on board with God’s kingdom program through repentance, the bulldozer, to use Isaiah’s image, which fills in the valleys of self-centeredness, brings down the mountains of pride, and smoothes over the rough and rugged places of unrighteousness in our lives so that God can drive directly into our hearts and we into his.

So, from the opening words of Jesus, that leaves the word “believe” for us to consider. What does it mean to believe? If you were able to participate in last week’s at home e-retreat, you might recall that the writer of that retreat, Shirley Paz, pastor of spiritual formation at West Congregational Church in Haverhill, had us consider the nature of belief on the first day. She reminded us that there is much talk about believing at Christmastime. Children are asked, “Do you believe in Santa?” The culture is often asked, “Do you believe in miracles?” And churchgoers can be asked, “Do you believe in the virgin birth?” Most of us, Shirley offers, will say we believe in God, and even in Jesus, his incarnated Son. But how do we live that out? How does what we believe inform what we do? That is truly the question of belief.

You see, the challenge we often have with this word is that it can get reduced to mental assent, to simply agreeing with a set of propositions. Certainly, that’s the beginning of belief, but the biblical word is far richer and deeper than that. Belief, if it’s real, if it’s biblical, involves putting what we know, what we have agreed with, into practice. Jesus says as much as he winds up his sermon on the mount. He concludes that if we hear his words and don’t put them into practice, even if, presumably, we believe them, we’ll be like those who build our house, not on rock but on sand (Ma. 7:24-27). In a similar manner, Paul, in his great and magisterial theological work, Romans, bookends this work with the statement that he’s put it all together to call his readers to the “obedience that comes from faith” (1:5; 16:26).

Belief, in other words, is not simply mental assent. If it’s alive, it becomes a living trust. It doesn’t mean we will have all the answers or always do everything in a right and godly way, or that we will never fumble with our faith. Zechariah will show us the truth of that. But it does mean that we will seek to be humbly obedient, as Mary demonstrates, seeking always to trust and act on what God has for us. The opening paragraphs of Luke’s account of the good news will help us think about what it means to put what we know into practice so that what we believe becomes not just mental assent but living trust. We’ll consider Zechariah this week and Mary the next.

I. An Account of Things Fulfilled

A. Before we get to either, I think it’s helpful to observe that Luke begins his account of the good news about Jesus by briefly describing the evidence on which our belief rests. For two or three decades after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the accounts of his life largely circulated in oral form. Though villagers in ancient Palestine didn’t have newspapers or television, Facebook or twitter, (how ever did they live?!), they did have what we could call

storytellers, not folks who made stuff up, but those who maintained the eyewitness accounts of significant events in their life and times. The accuracy of these accounts was supported by the fact that there were many who witnessed the events described and would raise a shout if someone tried to pass on something that actually didn't happen. If, for instance, someone tried to declare that Jesus liked to fry fish by zapping them with his walking staff, there were many around who could attest that this was never the case, as fun as it might have been for him! And so, on a more serious note, Paul can write in 1 Cor. 15 with confidence about the resurrection of Jesus because there were a great many folk to whom Jesus appeared after his crucifixion. Paul even lists some of them for his readers at the church in Corinth so that they can check it out if they so desired.

Illustration: Now, one of the reasons this is so important for us is not only so we will have the right information on which to base our belief, but so that this information will be powerful. You see, our temptation, and it has been the temptation of humans over time, is to create a Jesus of our own desires, one who speaks and acts like we think he should speak and act. The major problem with this approach is that this Jesus ends up looking an awful lot like us and so he can't really transform us because we've made him to be like us! To be transformed, to begin living the life that is truly life, we need a Jesus who will both love us and challenge us. We need the Jesus of the eyewitness accounts.

B. So, before this generation of eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus had died out, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded the good news about Jesus. Luke, as we just read, tells us that he has gathered and organized the eyewitness accounts into a form which would enable future readers to come to know Jesus. But importantly, knowing with certainty the things we have been taught, as Luke puts it, is not the end of the matter. Enter Zechariah.

## II. Zechariah – Fumbling Faith

A. Zechariah was a life-long priest, a professional clergyman we might say. At the time of the birth of Jesus, there were an estimated eighteen to twenty thousand priests serving at the temple in Jerusalem! They worked in shifts of twenty-four divisions; Zechariah's was named after one of the ancient priests named Abijah, and each division served for two weeks a year. During this time, Zechariah was actually chosen to burn the incense that accompanied the morning and evening sacrifice, on the altar just outside the most holy place of the Temple. It was a huge honor and an experience of a lifetime.

B. As it turns out, it became that in spades for Zechariah given that an angel of the Lord—a messenger from God—visited him while he was performing this incense burning duty. As you might imagine, Zechariah was a bit freaked out! No matter how devout you are, being visited by an angel has got to be an earth-shattering experience. But the angel told Zechariah to chill and to know that his prayers had been answered. He and his wife Elizabeth were to have their long-cherished dream fulfilled. They were going to become parents, and what's more, their son would have the unique, prophetic role of preparing a people for the arrival of the Messiah.

C. But rather than jumping for joy, Zechariah, this sturdy and long-time God believer, hesitated. This man of faith began to fumble. He doubted, and, we might conclude, for good reason. Although as a teacher of the faith he well knew that God had often brought new life through old and previously barren women—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah, just to name a few—Zechariah didn't figure this could ever happen in his case. He was old, his wife was old, and that was that. What caused this prayerful priest, this God believer, to resist what God was saying to him? What caused him to hold back putting what he believed into practice?

D. Whatever the reason, can I just say that I appreciate it?! I do so for three reasons.

1. First, I appreciate Zechariah's humanness and his fumbling faith because that's what I have, and I'm pretty sure you have, at least from time to time. Such fumbling reminds us that sometimes it's hard to put what we say believe into practice because we still really have so many questions and doubts. Francis Collins, a scientist who writes on matters of faith, offers that doubt is an element of faith because God's ways and plans are not utterly airtight and completely understandable to us. And so we will fumble and stumble. But doubt, if we let it, often provides the questions, and the fuel, to move us forward.

2. Second, I then appreciate how God stuck to his purposes. Zechariah's fumbling didn't mean that team Gabriel was going to lose the game. Elizabeth was still going to conceive and God was going to continue to work out his plan to redeem and restore the world, whether Zechariah willingly played along or not. God's words, his promises, were still going to come true at the appointed time (v. 20). Zechariah helps me appreciate, in other words, that God is bigger than me and that his story moves on, despite my failings.

3. But third, I appreciate Zechariah's experience because it shows that God was not only concerned for his big story, but for Zechariah's smaller story. God cared enough for Zechariah to help move him along and overcome his doubts. He did so by giving him, not a sign, but, strangely enough, the gift of silence, for almost nine months, until his son had been born. What do you think it was like for Zechariah to come out of that temple and have to play a game of charades to try and explain to those looking on why he had been in the temple so long?! Even more, what do you think it was like not being able to speak for almost nine months? What do you think he thought about? How much more clearly do you think he might have been able to think by having his speech removed? Zechariah's speech was taken away so that he could hear and see God more clearly. As a line from the old Eagle's song has it, "You can look in the sky and see the stars but still not see the light." Sometimes it's not until something is taken away that we can see clearly.

### III. Seeing More Clearly in the Wilderness

A. To help Zechariah see more clearly, God brought him, we might say, out into the wilderness. The wilderness is, more often than not, the place where we truly meet God. Throughout the Bible we see that this desert place is where God is most personally encountered. Moses, Jacob, Israel, even Jesus had their wilderness experiences. These were times when trust was developed. Why the wilderness? Because the wilderness is the place where what we really trust in, what we look to for meaning and happiness, is exposed, regardless of what we say we believe. It either runs out or is taken away or we finally find it to be inadequate. It's the place where we learn that not our career, or our family or our relationships or our achievements or our money or our health can really, in the long run, sustain us. In the wilderness we learn that it's only by trusting in God that we will experience real life and deliverance.

Zechariah was given such a gift by God because God wanted what he believed to grow into, and become actual, living trust. So God took away what Zechariah used to make his living, his speech, so that God himself, not what Zechariah said about God, would be the basis of his trust.

Where, Zechariah moves us to ask, might God be asking you to put your belief into practice? Where is he asking you to trust his word? How might he be asking you to move from mental assent to living trust? Is it giving up something that might be harmful to others or to you? Is it facing a fear? Is it being willing to change your plans? Is it offering yourself as a gift to another in some way? Whatever it is, know that God is for you and desires to draw you closer to himself. May you meet him as he seeks to move your belief from mind to heart, from assent to action.