



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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DECEMBER 23, 2018
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
LONGING TO BELIEVE

Longing To Believe: Wisdom
Micah 5:22-5a; Matthew 1:18-25

What do you say when an angel speaks to you?

Mind you, I have never had such an experience, so I have to rely on the experiences of other people to find out how to talk to an angel. When God's emissaries appeared to Abram and Sarai to tell them that finally Sarai would have a baby years after they were promised to have descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sand in the sea, Abram asked, "How? I am a hundred years old and my wife is no spring chicken at 90. How are we to have a child?"

When Abram's grandson Jacob returned home after running away when he tricked his brother and father, he got into a wrestling match with an angel by the Jabbok River. "Who are you?" He wanted to know. "Tell me your name and bless me!"

Hundreds of years later, an elderly priest named Zechariah ministered at the altar of God on behalf of the Hebrew people. An angel appeared and told him that he and his wife, who had been unable to have children, would have a child who would become a prophet. Stunned and afraid, Zechariah asked, "How can this happen because I am an old man and my wife is old, too?" A few months later, his wife's cousin Mary was also visited by an angel who told her that she would conceive and have a baby who would become the Savior of the world. Mary asked, "How can it be since I have no husband? I have not been with a man. How can it happen?" Nine months later, when angels suddenly appeared and told them that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem, shepherds reacted with fear and said to one another, "Can this be true? Let's go see for ourselves!" It seems that most of the time, when an angel appears and delivers news, even good news, someone asks, "How can it be? I have to see for myself."

There is at least one exception, however: Joseph. We are told that an angel appeared to him in a dream to tell him that the child in Mary's womb—Mary, to whom he was betrothed—was the son of God and he should

marry her and let God take care of everything. Matthew tells us that Joseph woke up, got up, and did exactly as he was told.

It seems to me that angels—being the messengers of God—ought to be trustworthy and beyond reproach. There should be no reason to question them because, after all, they speak on behalf of God. They are the voice of God to humanity. Yet, Abram and Jacob and Zechariah and Mary—all chosen by God for major roles in the story of God’s people—asked the angels questions. They weren’t simply questions like, “Ok, so what happens next?” or “Great. When exactly will this wonderful event happen?” Probably, if we could hear their tone of voice, see the expression on their faces, and know everything that was running through their minds, we would have heard something like, “Are you crazy? There is no way in God’s good earth that old people or virgins can get pregnant. Are you pulling my leg?”

Every one of these people wanted to believe that God would do what he said, but there were certain biological facts that could not be ignored. There were social norms to be observed and expectations to be fulfilled. There was a way that the world worked, and these pronouncements weren’t part of that world which, by the way, God created and set in motion! How can this be?

Why Joseph? Of all the characters in the Bible who should have questioned the angel who spoke to him, Joseph should have. He knew how things worked. He knew his relationship with Mary. He knew himself and thought he knew Mary. Why didn’t he ask any questions? Why didn’t he challenge the angel like all of the others?

I suspect Joseph had already asked many questions, questions of Mary, questions of himself, questions of his rabbi, questions of God. We know he had decided to quietly divorce Mary (however you do such a thing in a small village), so we figure he had asked some tough questions and arrived at what he thought were the answers. Why did he not question the angel in his dream? Wisdom. Joseph’s faith and his longing to believe were supported by wisdom.

Wisdom is a combination of experience and facts, of understanding and know how. We get to see the other biblical characters exercising their wisdom by asking questions, exploring options, trying to figure out what God is up to. We see Joseph acting on his faith which is buttressed by wisdom.

We know that true faith is not blind acceptance of what someone else tells us. Scripture explains that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). When you hope or long for something, you think about it. You look at all of the possibilities for receiving what you want. You ask yourself whether or not your desire is reasonable, whether it is good for all or only for yourself, and whether or not it fits within God’s desires for us. We can only reach a conviction, a firm resolve about something, when we have turned it over and examined it from all sides. When we have a conviction about a matter of faith, it means that we have asked our questions. We have examined what God has revealed to us. And we have decided that this matter of faith is worthy of our belief. Our longing to believe is much more than a desperate desire. It is a commitment of our entire being to something we understand to be true.

The Bible is a record, a story of our longing to believe, and throughout its pages we discover questions, challenges, uncertainties, and changes of mind and heart. How can this be? What do these things mean for us?

On the 1950's radio series titled, *This I Believe*, Edward R. Murrow invited people of all persuasions to share what they understood to be the core of their beliefs. One of the people who spoke was Martha Graham, the renowned teacher and choreographer of dance. Ms. Graham said this:

I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing, or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated, precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which come shape of achievement, the sense of one's being, the satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God.¹

I have never really thought of myself as an athlete, certainly not as “an athlete of God.” Yet, I think Ms. Graham has zeroed in on our longing to believe. When a dancer performs on the stage, the movements look effortless and sublime. From toe lift to the extension of a finger, from the arc of the body to the expression on the face, every choreographed aspect of the dance fits perfectly into the one before and the one which follows so that we behold a thing of beauty and meaning. Were we to inquire how the dancer

¹Martha Graham, “An Athlete of God,” *This I Believe*, Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, eds. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 84. From the 1950's radio series by Edward R. Murrow.

came to move with such ease, however, we would hear of years and years of rote training, of dance moves taught, corrected, and taught again. We would be shown callouses and bruises and strained muscles. We would hear of days that never end and nights that are very short. As Ms. Graham pointed out,

Dancing appears glamorous, easy, delightful. But the path to the paradise of that achievement is not easier than any other. There is fatigue so great that the body cries even in its sleep. There are times of complete frustration. There are daily small deaths. Then, I need all the comfort that practice has stored in my memory and the tenacity of faith. But it must be the kind of faith that Abraham had, wherein he "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief."²

Belief is equally deserving of the steady, devoted, unwavering, sometimes meticulous, always focused practice of faith. When we hear Abram and Jacob and Zechariah and Mary asking of the angels, "How can this be?", we hear them practicing their faith. They are rehearsing the steps, the movements, the expressions that faith requires. They are strengthening muscles of the mind and heart so that they will be strong, resilient, and flexible. Faith that is weak and atrophied is of little use to us. Faith such as God desires must be well-exercised, well-rehearsed, and eager to be danced.

When Joseph awakes from his dream in which the angel told him not to fear because the child in Mary's womb was of God, he eagerly leapt onto the stage. He had rehearsed his faith. He knew the stories of Messiah. He had memorized the prophecies and knew the psalms by heart. It was all muscle memory to him so that when the angel said, "It's okay, Joseph. This is part of the story line. Now it is time to dance," Joseph eagerly entered into the dance of God and Mary with him.

Wisdom is to faith what rehearsals are to dance. The questions we ask, the ideas we explore, the prayers we make, the people we consult, the struggles we undergo, the joys we celebrate, the faith we affirm and challenge and change are all part of the wisdom of longing to believe. The tiniest aspect of our faith is tremendously important to our faith. Ms. Graham said: "In a dancer there is a reverence for such forgotten things as the miracle of the small beautiful bones and their delicate strength. In a thinker there is a

²Graham, 85.

reverence for the beauty of the alert and directed and lucid mind.”³ And I would add, in the child of God there is a reverence for the exploration of truth, the excitement of encounter with the Divine, and the holy moments when we wonder if God even knows we exist. Those moments flex our faith and prepare us for the dance of life.

In a world where we are besieged with so much information and confused by competing claims about truth, at a time when faith is given lip service but the practice of faith receives little attention, we long to believe that God is real and truly does love us. Two days before the biggest holiday celebrated in our country and around the world, we long to believe the story of a baby in a manger is true. More than that, we long to believe that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to us and cares about us. We long to believe.

If so, then let us be wise and practice our faith. Ask your questions, test your assumptions, read the Scriptures, offer your prayers, wonder about God so that if and when an angel speaks to you, like Joseph, you can rise up and join the dance. Amen.

³Graham, 86.

December 23, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is two days before Christmas, O God, and it is difficult to believe that we are already on the threshold of this holy day. It is two days before we focus our attention on the stable with its cows and donkeys and sheep, two days before the weary mother takes refuge among the humble animals, two days before an anxious father turns a cow stall into a maternity ward. It is two days before we once again put all of our hopes on a baby lying in a manger. It is Christmas again, O God, and we are excited and grateful!

We often think about the state of the world in those days and the condition of our world now. We offer prayers of gratitude for the love which was born in a little town in a crossroads country. Yet, we seldom think about the concern, the disappointment, the worry, and the fear that you might experience as you watch your children struggle so much with life. We seldom think about how you must feel today as our world wrestles with poverty and war, with disease and injustice, with hatred and distrust. Forgive us for not always remembering the baby in a manger who came to bring us peace. Forgive us for forgetting the joy of the shepherds and the hope which was the angels' song. Forgive us for failing to believe that love came down at Christmas and remains with us through all of the new years.

It is two days before Christmas and we are grateful for this gift which blossomed into new life for us all, O God. It is a holy time of year, and we are filled with joy and excitement because we still have hope that the peace which you offer us all will fully be received this year. It is the birthday of our Lord and Savior, and we cherish your goodness which bathes us in the warmth of your grace. It is today which is always a good day to remind you that we do love you, O God, and know that you love us, too. Wrap us in your Christmas care, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.