

“Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard
and your wife will bear a son... (Luke 1: 13).

“... Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid
to take Mary as your wife...” (Matt. 1:20).

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2).

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news
of a great joy...” (Luke 2:10).

“... when Herod saw that he has been tricked by the magi,
he became enraged...” (Matt. 2:16).

“... he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born” (Luke 2:4).

Last week we looked at narratives reflective of the expectation by Old Testament saints of a coming deliverer from the cryptic hint of conflict until “the seed of the women” crushes the head of “the seed of the serpent” (Gen 3:15) to Micah’s prediction that the promised one, what Noah was not, would be born in an obscure Judean village (5:2).

To continue our very brief series, we turn to the birth narratives and focus on the reactions of people to the announcement of a major event in the story of human redemption, the coming of the “seed” (Gen.12:1-3), the redeemer-king, Isaiah’s suffering servant. While the women in the narrative, Elizabeth and Mary, responded in faith (“... to take away my disgrace” [Luke 1:25], “... be it done to me according to your word” [Luke 1:38]), even rejoicing together over what would shock most of us if we were in their place (Luke 1:42, 46), we find a mixed reaction among the men from worship (the magi and the shepherds), to fear and unbelief (Zacharias), to consternation (Joseph), to mad outrage (Herod the Great), and apathy (the nation’s religious leadership). In each case, except for two, faith and trust prevailed through the revelation of God (through several appearances, a dream).

A. The Experience of Zacharias

1. The narrative begins in the context of the priestly duties of an aged priest whose name means “God has remembered.” Assigned to burn incense in the Holy Place before the veil, itself a symbol of the presence of God in mystery form while the saints were praying in the Court of the Women (Luke 1:10), Zacharias had been not only called to his two-weeks of annual service in the temple (the eighth cycle of twenty-four organized by Solomon [I Chron 24:4-6], but to serve in a unique way assigned by lot (Luke 1:9).
2. Gabriel appeared (Luke 1:19) to the right of the incense altar with an announcement of a son and information about his son’s role in God’s great redemptive plan. Troubled, fear and unbelief gripped Zacharias (Luke 1:12) though the angel promised “joy and gladness.”
3. Zacharias’ response was unbelief (“How shall I know this for certain?” [Luke 1:18], “...you did not believe my words...” [Luke 1:20]).

4. Then, the angel identified himself (Luke 1:19), but Zacharias' unbelief brought muteness (Luke 1:20) and he was reduced to communication through play-acting and remained that way for the duration of his wife's pregnancy.
5. When Mary visited Elizabeth to see the sign that Gabriel had spoken of (Luke 1:36), Zacharias received a third confirmation (an angelically delivered message, muteness), a baby leaping in his wife's womb ("He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while in his mother's womb" [Luke 1:15], "the baby leaped in her womb" [Luke 1:41]).
6. With the naming of John by Zacharias, the muteness ended and he spoke praising God exclaiming that John was a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham ("... He spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets... to show mercy toward our fathers and to remember His covenant" [Luke 1:70-73]).

Unlike Mary, who immediately believed the angelic message, only wondering about the mechanics, Zacharias did not and, though it took some time, he eventually did.

B. The experience of Joseph

1. When Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he did not receive an immediate message from an angel. Only sometime later did heaven speak after he considered a proper response while he was sleeping. He not only learned of the origin of Mary's conception, but, like Zacharias, His role in redemptive history ("... He will save His people from their sins." [Matt. 1:21]).
2. Both Joseph (Matt. 1:25b) and Zacharias (Luke 1:62-63) named their offspring in obedience to angelic instruction outside of the custom of the day (obviously Joseph only assumed the role of fatherhood).
3. Joseph showed remarkable faith in taking Mary as his wife (although he did not consummate the marriage, evidencing remarkable moral restraint) until Mary delivered their first child ("...until..." [Matt. 1:25a]). The family later added four other sons (James, Joseph, Joses/Judas, and Simon) as well as several sisters (Matt. 13:55-56, Mark 6:3,)

Joseph did not have the benefit of an angelic dream-visit until after he received news of his wife's pregnancy and he acted in a godly manner with the information he received (Matt. 1:18-19). When the angel did reveal the nature of Mary's pregnancy, not by a visual meeting but through the agency of a dream, he responded immediately in faith.

C. The experience of the shepherds

1. The night of Jesus' birth an angel appeared to a group of shepherds who were tending their flock in the environs of Bethlehem (Luke 1:8).
 - a. The coldest months in Israel are between November and March with freezing temperatures and snow, even in Jerusalem. When it is quite cold and winds are high, sheep have difficulties and are stressed so they are often kept in protective enclosures in severe conditions.
 - b. These sheep were "out in the fields (Luke 1:8)," so does this conflict with the traditional date for the celebration of the advent? It may not! Sheep were kept year-around south of Jerusalem because they were designated for temple sacrifice. If this is valid, and I am only speculating, the announcement of

- Jesus' birth was to shepherds watching sheep bound for slaughter, symbolic of the "true lamb" who would meet the same fate in Jerusalem.
- c. Further, when Jesus was born, they placed Him in a stone feeding trough wrapped in "swaddling clothes." When ewe lambs were born, shepherds would wrap them with swaddling clothes, place them in a manger, and examine them for any possible blemishes. Jesus, the true ewe lamb, was placed in a manger also, but He was without blemish!!
 - d. Because shepherds had duties that kept them from regular temple worship, they were seen as second-class citizens. It is to the less respected that God announced His son outside the immediate family of Mary and Elizabeth. Is there a message to ponder here?
2. Not only did an angel announce the birth of Jesus, appearing in glorious form, but the heavens were rent open, and they saw and heard an angelic choir (Luke 2:9-15).
 3. They responded, as did Mary, when she learned that her relative Elizabeth, was pregnant ("haste" [Luke 1:39], "they came in haste..." [Luke 2:16]).
 4. The shepherds went to Bethlehem and what they had been told was confirmed; they immediately could not contain themselves and told others (Luke 2:17-18).

Like Mary, the shepherds immediately believed the angel's message, that was also sung by the heavenly choir and responded with action. It took Zacharias and Joseph a little more assistance to get the message!!

D. The experience of the Magi

1. Sometime after our Lord's birth, likely after many returned from registering for an empire-wide census in their heritage cities, the clan of David being large for such a small village, Bethlehem emptied to its normal size; Joseph and Mary may have secured better lodging, a house (Luke 2:1-4, 11).
2. At some point, while Joseph and Mary were still in Bethlehem, they had several interesting visitors. The wise men were probably Gentile believers.
3. 'Abraham's seed,' astrologers/astronomers, believers in a coming Messiah. They likely had journeyed from Babylon or Persia (this is based on the length of travel-time to Jerusalem, perhaps a year). This is surmised in that Herod had babies murdered two years old and younger, perhaps an expanded timeframe to assure success most likely (Matt. 2:16).

Could they have come to faith because of the diaspora of the Jews to Babylon where we know there was a large and influential Jewish community? Possessing a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, they may have understood the appearance of the star to be a fulfillment of the Balaam oracle. Instead of cursing the nation, Balaam blessed (Num. 24:2) saying, "A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall arise from Israel (24:17)."

The "star" was probably a manifestation of God's glory (because its actions are unique). Stephen may have given us a clue to this strange celestial happening (the star stopped over Jerusalem and then reappeared but stopped over a house in Bethlehem) saying, "The God of glory appeared to Abraham...and said to him, 'Depart...' (Acts 7:2-3). I take it that the star was a bright body observable in the sky controlled by God, even created by Him, to direct the magi (the Lord controls the heavens as He does the earth!).

4. That the magi came to Jerusalem would make sense because they understood the star to announce the advent of the King, Jerusalem being the city of the King (Luke 2:1-2). They came with the recognition that this King was more than a human because they came to worship Him (Luke 2:2, 11).
5. The gifts they brought tell us much about the baby (Luke 2:11). Gold speaks of His royalty; frankincense of His deity; and myrrh, a perfume for embalming the dead, of His death (it was also an ingredient in anointing oil of priests and kings and as a medicine for healing diseases). In these gifts, we see who He is, what He had come to do, and the cost He paid!
6. What did the couple do with these lavish gifts? While we do not know, most surmise that it supported them in their sojourn in Egypt (Luke 1:14).
7. Were there three magi? It seems that the entourage would have been quite large; these were likely men of prominence and wealth travelling in a caravan. That three kinds of gifts are mentioned does not suggest that there were three magi.

The magi were men of faith who believed the promise made to Abraham, who also came from the same area, the area of the great Babylonian Empire. They believed the “seed” would come who would redeem His people. As Gentile proselytes to biblical Judaism they might provide a clue for the writing of the gospel by Matthew; Gentiles will be joined with Jewish believers in the Messiah’s kingdom (remember, the book ends with the words “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... [Matt. 28:19]).

E. The experience of Herod

1. Herod ruled Israel under the auspices of Rome from 37-4 BC. He was known for his building projects (Masada, the great harbor and city of Caesarea [the residence of the procurators], the Temple in Jerusalem, and the Herodian, to name a few) as well as his fearsome cruelty (the murder of two sons as well as his favorite wife, Mariamne), and for His paranoid fear of threats to his throne, being consistent with the trauma caused by the magi’s announcement of a king resulting in the killing of the children in Bethlehem.
2. Herod’s response to the magi was fear (Luke 2:3), troubled by a threat to his hegemony.
3. Threat led to subterfuge and lying (Luke 2:8).
4. When Herod’s plan to kill the Christ-child failed because the magi was alerted to Herod’s evil intent (Luke 2:12), his response was a terrible act of murder (Luke 2:16).

While God was executing His redemptive plan for the ages with the advent of the promised one, the devil was not idle as we see in the actions of Herod to abort it. While he claimed to favor the Jews and the Scriptures, he symbolizes those over the centuries that have opposed God’s designs. None have succeeded and none will, though “Herod’s” are found on every page of human history. This Herod died in 4 BC wracked with disease!

F. The religiously knowledgeable teachers in leadership

1. The chief priests were Annas ben Seth (Annas had five sons or sons-in-law that succeeded him, one being his son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas). The scribes were the professional teachers of the Holy Scriptures (Luke 2:4), not mere copyists. It

would be logical for Herod to consult with the knowledgeable on a subject of interest like this.

2. The religious leadership knew the Scriptures and provided the correct answer, quoting the prophet Micah (Luke 2:5-6).
3. However, they had no interest in joining the magi in their quest because they did not interpret correctly the truthfulness of what they knew so well, the Holy Scriptures. They knew it with their blighted intellect, but the truth did not reach to their affections. The Sadducees, the upper leadership of the nation, remained in power by staying in the good graces of Rome. What a contrast to Mary and the shepherds who made “haste” to confirm what they had been told! The magi travelled a great distance, taking considerable time to do so; the leadership had only to travel less than five miles at the most!

The nation’s leadership reminds us that intellectual knowledge alone, without heart-attachment, is delusory, even tragic. You and I have met people who seem to know more than they personally embrace. Here is the response of callousness and unconcern!

Applications:

1. I am struck by the occurrences of the word “afraid” in the birth narratives (Zacharias, Joseph, the shepherds by startling disclosures, one out of personal greed of place (Herod), and others should have been, but were blind of heart (the religious leadership). Fear is often the human reaction to something new and unusual, yet what caused the reaction was the disclosure of the most wonderful of truths. Is that not our knee-jerk reaction many times? Most of our fears are rooted, not in reality, but in our insecurities. I heard once that 95% of our fears simply do not come true!!
2. The redemptive story unfolds to new heights by a unique array specific of events: a particular two-week cycle, a uniquely named person, a lot establishing his task, a strangely acting “star.” Can you and I doubt the sovereignty of God in the circumstances of our lives?
3. When you think of the people from the male perspective in our Lord’s birth narrative (a priest, a carpenter, lowly shepherds, astrologers/astronomers, a king, and the religious intelligentsia), one encounters a wide spectrum of people. Some were at the lower end of society, another was a blue-collar professional, one was a cleric, and some were from the upper class and wealthy. Most were Jews, though several were proselytes (meaning Gentiles). God’s mercies and grace know no limitations. We have every right to be grateful!
4. There are some events in life that simply are not understandable from a human perspective; all that we can say is that God brings about His purposes in circuitous ways at times. It is understandable that the magi would inquire in the city of the king of the birth of the king, but did they not have any by insight concerning Herod’s character? Why would God allow serious believers, whose presence in Jerusalem was only to worship, to be the unwitting secondary cause behind the death of children in Bethlehem? How could such a tragedy be in God’s plan to extend His kingdom? All that I can say is that God’s power and wisdom is far greater than the creatures He created; all that I can do is believe that God can use evil intent to promote His purposes.
5. For we who are husbands, Joseph becomes a remarkable model of what it means, at least in part, of being a leader in the home. His godly sensitivity to the instructions of the Lord in a unique, strange circumstance becomes a model of trust in times when things

do not make sense as it relates to our mates. Joseph becomes exemplary of what it means to follow the Lord in shocking circumstances as well as modelling care for his wife over his own likely interests.

6. The choices we make in life are a mirror of our values, the cost of the execution of our values as well. Though not physical heirs of Abraham, the magi were heirs of Abraham, sons none-the-less (Gentile-Abrahamites) like us. Though they likely had financial and material advances that you and I do not (time for lengthy travel, wealth for expensive gifts), they did do what they could and that is all that God demands of us (He only asks what He has provided, the strength and opportunities he affords. Our actions, not our mere words, reveals the affections of our hearts (think of the marked contrast between Zacharias, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi and those of Herod and the leadership of the Jewish nation). Our hearts determine the quality of the actions of our hands and are revealed thereby (Luke 6:45). It is not the size of the gift; it is the devotion of heart in its being given!
7. When I think of these four men and two groups of men, I find myself pondering several questions, but they can be summarized in one word, WHY.
 - a. If God made me incapable of speech because I doubted Him, I would be and should have been mute most of my life. Why did He make Zacharias speechless? What did it accomplish?
 - b. Why did God allow Joseph to be tormented over the supposed unfaithfulness of Mary when He could have made it clear from the beginning that such was not the case? Why did God reveal His plans to Mary, but left Joseph to ponder the dissolution of his marriage?
 - c. Why did God send an angel and an angelic host to the shepherds revealing the birth of Jesus, but left the religious leadership in darkness?
 - d. Why would God allow Herod to step on the page of history when all that he left of his legacy are the ruins of his once large building projects, tragic acts of destruction in his own family, and crushed families of murdered unnamed children? Why would God allow such a creep to live and prosper?

The Why's of life are always rooted in circumstances we do not understand and, therefore, they perplex and disturb us. I have not discovered the answer to God's incomprehensible will, but I do take refuge in His character. I find myself reflecting on William Cooper's great poem, "God Moves in Mysterious Way."

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill;
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the LORD by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev'ry hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

Many of my questions, things I wonder about, as I read the Holy Scriptures,
pondering the circuitry of events, fade into trust when I think of my Lord and the gift of
life He extended to me in the giving of the Lamb of God.



AND WITH HIS WOUNDS
WE WERE HEALED

ISAIAH 53:5