

December 19, 2021 – Luke 1:39-56

It is remarkable how husbands and wives can be so very similar and so very different at the same time. I see it with my own wife all the time. There are some things that we are perfectly on the same page about.

Times that we can finish each other's sentences. Say the exact same joke at the exact same time. Know what the other one is thinking with merely a glance.

But there are other areas in which we have nothing in common. I love sci-fi and action movies. She likes reality television and period dramas. I read books. She listens to podcasts. I drink diet pop and tea. She drinks sugary Pepsi and flavored waters. We're a lot alike. But we also have some distinct differences.

This occurred to me as I was reading about Elizabeth today in our Gospel lesson. Elizabeth was the wife of Zechariah, of course. And when he first introduces them at the beginning of this chapter, St Luke kind of lumps them together as *“righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.”* So they had that in common. But when you start reading their stories, you find that they are very different people.

Zechariah was righteous and obedient in his actions, but he was missing one very important thing: faith. Zechariah lacked faith. Faith that God could give him a son. Faith that God could perform a miracle. Faith that God would fulfill his promises.

And for that lack of faith, he was punished. He was silenced. God took away his voice. Forced him to watch and wait as the miracle of his son's birth unfolded. We hear Zechariah speak before his wife gets pregnant. And we hear him speak after she has the baby. But during her pregnancy, Zechariah is silent.

Elizabeth is exactly the opposite. We don't hear from her at all before she's pregnant. We don't hear much from her after she has her baby. But while she's pregnant, she says a mouthful.

And what she says indicates that she had more faith than her husband. A lot more faith. Where Zechariah has doubt and distrust and a need for proof, Elizabeth is the pinnacle of faith and trust and acceptance of whatever God gives her.

*“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”* She says that about Mary, but she could have easily been talking about herself. Not only does she have complete faith that this pregnancy is a gift from God. Not only does she obey the angel's command to name their son John. A command she didn't even hear in person.

But on top of all that, Elizabeth believes the most important part of the angel's message. The part where her son is a prophet who will prepare the way for the Messiah. The part where God will become man to save his people.

The part that makes it possible for her to know without a doubt that when she hears Mary's voice and the baby inside her leaps joy, that means she is talking to the mother of her Lord. That God has done the unthinkable: He has taken on flesh and will be born as a human being.

When you put all that together, Elizabeth's faith is mind-blowing. I mean, honestly, she's right up there with her son, the greatest prophet who ever lived. Elizabeth believes wholeheartedly in everything that God has promised to her. Without exception.

Which is rare. It's very, very rare. Zechariah certainly didn't have that kind of faith. And I don't know if you or I do either.

That's one of the reasons why God gives us so many assurances for our faith. Why he gives us things like Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Because *hearing* God's promises isn't always enough for us.

Sometimes we need to feel God's promises on our skin. Like a splash of water. See it. Like the wet hair of a squirming baby over the font. Smell it. Like the smell of sweet red wine in the communion cup. Taste it. Like the crunch of an unleavened wafer between our teeth.

Those moments are God reaching out to us and shaking us by our shoulders. Yelling, "I'm real! My promises are real! And I will keep them! You can trust me."

But sometimes, the problem isn't so much about our lack of faith, but our faith in the wrong things. Elizabeth, for example: her faith is exceptional not just because she believed *after* God performed a miracle. But because she believed *before* it as well.

And there are plenty of women in her situation who would have had trouble with that. She couldn't have children. And that bothered her. A lot.

There are many women today who have their faith shaken by infertility. Back in Elizabeth's day, I have to think it was even worse. The cultural pressure to have a child was enormous. Elizabeth describes herself as feeling disgraced. It was horrible for her.

And yet, when God gives her a child, how does she respond? She says that the Lord has *shown* his favor. He's revealed it. He's put it on display.

But the favor he was now showing to her was already there. She believed that. Even though she felt so disgraced by not having a child, she never doubted that God loved her. That God was watching out for her. That she was God's child. The only thing that's changed is that he has chosen to show her that love. In this specific way.

How many of us could say that? How many of us look at our lives when something goes wrong and say, "OK, where are you God? Don't you love me? Why is this happening? If you loved me, you'd take this suffering away. If you loved me, you'd take this disgrace away. If you loved me, you'd give me what I want."

But that isn't faith in God. That isn't faith in God's promises. That's faith in your own health, and wealth, and wellbeing. You've put your trust in the things of this world and called them "God." But they're not "God."

And when we lose them, it doesn't mean that God has ceased to exist or stopped loving us or failed to keep his promises. It just means that, at that moment, God has chosen not to show his love for us in that specific way.

But he still shows his love for us in so many other ways. He shows his love for us in creation. In a beautiful earth that provides for all our needs. He shows his love for us in our church. In this family of faith that supports us and encourages us and helps us grow in our knowledge of him.

But most of all, he shows his love for us in his Son. Which is what Christmas is all about. Celebrating the timeless, eternal act of love that God displayed when he came down from heaven and was born in Bethlehem. A demonstration of love that will never fade.

Which is why we need times like Advent. Times of contemplation and repentance. Times when we realize that God doesn't need to prove anything to us. God has always kept his promises.

And so the real question is: Why should we be so favored that our Lord should come to us? Rather than doubting God when he doesn't give us exactly what we wanted, we should be rejoicing that he has shown his love in such a wonderful way. In more than temporary gifts that fade away. In the eternal gift of his Son, crucified for the forgiveness of our sins.

Blesséd are you who have believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to you! Blessed, not because he wouldn't fulfill them otherwise. But blessed because when you believe that, then you also believe that God is always there for you. That he always loves you. Always forgives you. And that he will always watch over you. To the very end of the age. Amen.