

WHO CAN YOU TRUST?

Christmas will soon be here. Have you thought about Christmas yet? Once a holy day, all about Jesus, it has become a secular holiday all about twinkling lights, maybe Santa, and gifts ... lots of gifts, lots of buying.

But I'm not here to lament the loss of Jesus out of Christmas or the unhealthy consumerism that has gripped the celebration of His birth. Rather, I'm asking why the birth of this baby of humble origins, born in an obscure place and time, still generates worldwide attention. Some believe Him to be the most important person who ever walked this earth, while others think He has no place in our day and age. But there is no denying that His wisdom and personal sacrifice has impacted all recorded history, transformed cultures and nations, and influenced the lives of billions of individuals. Why is this so?

More Questions

Sometimes, the answer to our question(s) is found in asking more questions. The gospel stories found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of Jesus' birth with pronouncements, prayers, songs, and declarations ... and questions. The value of questions is that they invite a quest for truth, or at the very least a wonderment at the mystery. For the next few weeks, in preparation for Christmas, I'd like to ask you to ponder some questions with me – questions that arise from the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. I am hoping that you may recognize some of your longings and questionings in these stories. I am reading a book by Rob Burkhart, titled *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery*¹ and drawing on some of his ideas and insights.

I have found that those who are willing to honestly explore the rugged terrain of the Bible will find answers to life's deepest questions and thereby enrich their souls. Maybe you won't like the answers we find ... I didn't at first. But we just might discover a grand, sweeping truth so compelling, so beautiful, that we could actually make sense of life. What if we discovered someone who we can really believe in? I challenge you, this Christmas, to listen carefully, read the gospel stories again, and reflect on your life next to these stories. Then pray about where you are going in life.

Zechariah's Story

We usually focus solely on the birth of Jesus as the only Christmas story; and that's understandable for He is the focal point of Christmas. But there is more richness to His story than the stable in Bethlehem. A richness that involves other people, with stories and parts to play in God's greatest drama.

The story of Christmas begins with Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Zechariah is the name of numerous men found in Scripture, most prominent being the prophet of that name whose book is found in the Old Testament. It means “Yah remembers” ... our God remembers.

It’s kind of a long passage we just heard from the Gospel of Luke, about this one Zechariah who was a priest of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. He was one of the priests who offered up sacrifices for atonement of sins. Why do we have this story in the Bible? He was the father of John the Baptist, and John the Baptist was the prophet who came to announce the arrival of the Messiah. More than that, Zechariah’ story teaches important lessons about trust and our relationship with God, and lessons about ourselves.

So the story goes that when Zechariah was serving at the temple in Jerusalem it came his turn *“to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.”* While in there an angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that his wife would give birth to a son and, *“He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

Now remember that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were childless because she was not able to conceive; it says: *and they were both very old*. If you’ve ever known a couple who very dearly wanted a baby and couldn’t, then you know how heart-rending it can be. [These days we have all the might of medical science to help couples have a baby but as one doctor said, this area of medicine – that is human fertility - remains the most mysterious.] Of course Zechariah and Elizabeth knew all about the “birds and the bees” and likely had given up praying for a child long before. So when the angel told Zechariah this great news his reaction doesn’t seem so unusual.

The angel said: *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.”* And Zechariah is racking his brain, trying to remember ... what prayer?... oh, you mean the prayer about having a child? Geez, now you tell me my prayer’s answered. Where were you thirty years ago? ... Have you ever felt like your prayers went unanswered? Have you ever thought that God’s timing doesn’t make sense?

So Zechariah answers the angel: *“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”* That’s a fair question. Elizabeth’s biological clock had long ago stopped ticking. Why would God answer their old prayer with a miracle child now? This is all outside their understanding of how life worked. Maybe Zechariah was afraid to get his hopes up again, after all the years of disappointment. Maybe he couldn’t believe their dream of a child would come true, at last. He wasn’t prepared to trust his future or his hopes to anyone, not even an angel.

Trust and Faith

We talk and sing a lot about faith here at church ... meaning faith in God, whom we know in Jesus Christ. Yet aren't we a lot like Zechariah? *How can I be sure God's word is true?* The angel replied to Zechariah: *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news."* Of all people, Zechariah, a priest of the Lord, serving for years at the temple, reciting Psalms ... of all people he should trust the word of the Lord, brought to him directly from the throne of God. *"Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you,"* Psalm 9:10. And here we are in church week after week, listening to the Scriptures read, maybe some of us participate in a small group Bible study as well, and how hard is it to believe God's word is true ... true in our own lives?

Though we mostly don't think about it, trust is essential to living. Each day we trust family, friends, co-workers, and service providers. We trust doctors, pilots, teachers, restaurant cooks... even the stranger coming at us in a car at 50 mph (we trust he won't cross that thin, yellow line). The answer to the question (the question of Zechariah) "How can I be sure?" sets the direction of our lives: either to step out into new territory, or to hunker down in fear. For trust is risky business. Even if we have the love of family and support of friends, there will come a time when someone will break our trust. Someone we believed in will lie, or cheat, or abandon, or abuse – and trust gets trampled. As we go through life we must learn to navigate human relations and hopefully steer clear of the charlatans and manipulators. *"Like a broken tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble,"* Prov. 25:19.

In every era, in every nation, people have struggled to find something or someone they can trust for all time. Some go after possessions or hold tightly to theories, philosophies, or programs as though they were life preservers. But these things cannot save us. Some people trust in their money as a hedge against the destructive forces of life. Yet even it cannot make you truly safe. After the 2011 tsunami that struck Japan rescue workers found safes containing millions in cash. The owners were swept away along with those who lived in poverty.²

Still others trust in power... that's the attraction of unions, political parties, clubs or gangs – they're all a way to exert power and control. Yet trusting power can be deceptive. Much of life is beyond the control of anyone, no matter how powerful they are. In Zechariah's time, whether they liked it or not, the majority of people would have trusted the power of Rome, not Zechariah's wild-eyed, wilderness dwelling son, John. Nor would many have gambled their lives on John's cousin, the poor carpenter and teacher from Nazareth. Both died at the hands of more powerful men.

Yet 2,000 years later billions revere the words of John the Baptist and billions worship Jesus of Nazareth. The great and powerful of their day are

remembered as bit players in the larger story of John and Jesus. ***“Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing,”*** Psalm 146:3-4.

Triumph of Trust

So what can we learn about trust, and God, and life from Zechariah’s story?

- 1. Trust is possible.** Trust is given, not earned. We can choose to trust rather than doubt or fear.
- 2. Trust is precious.** Trust is a gift from one person to another.
- 3. Trust has potential.** Credibility and reliability enrich our lives financially, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. Without trust we lose many possibilities.

Zechariah found this out. He was struck dumb because he doubted the Lord’s promise. For nine months he was mute about God’s revelation to him. Doesn’t that happen to you and me? I mean we have a powerful experience of the Lord, and we don’t tell anyone, afraid they’ll think we’re nuts or maybe afraid it won’t be true. We read stuff in the Bible about God working in someone’s life, but find it hard to believe He works like that in our lives. So we remain mute about Him and His promises.

Journey to Faith

The Bible is all about trusting God. Over in the chapel there is inscribed over the door these words from the prophet Isaiah: ***“... those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint...”*** Isaiah 40:31. Most of us want to soar through life on wings like eagles; when challenges, disappointments, tragedies assail us, we want to rise above it all. The hardest and yet most common path through it all is to walk and not faint. That’s where the power of God comes in.

Maybe the pace of technology has conditioned us to believe that human nature and human relations can change in nano-seconds. But it’s not so. Contentment, joy, wisdom, peace, faith, and strength of character just don’t appear when we click on a screen. Those things come from knowing your true identity, having a deep sense of belonging, having purpose and meaning in life, and that comes from trusting in God’s promises. Zechariah’s initial doubt gave way to faith as he walked with God. Over the long months of his silence he continued serving at the temple and going about his daily duties. That journey eventually led him to a place of rejoicing and thanksgiving –it took nine months. His son John grew into the one who announced the coming of the Messiah we celebrate at Christmas.

We all have moments when we trust God’s great love and care and He pulls us through. At other times we wonder if God is there at all. There are aspects of my life I can easily trust to God and other aspects I’m not so sure – how about you? *“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever,”* Psalm 107:1. Why does the Bible repeat this phrase so often? Time-tested experience has shown that God is there, God does care, God is good, and His love for you and for me has no end. *“In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them,”* Psalm 22:4. When it seems like God isn’t there, we find encouragement in His word ... in the testimony of others who’ve seen God’s faithfulness.

Some things we trust implicitly; like the sun or gravity. Meanwhile eons of experience show that humans are unpredictable. God created people and people created chaos. Many voices say, “trust this ... or that ... or me.” How can you be sure whom to trust? The Christmas story lights the way. It is a story that is out of this world and yet very much in this world. The story of Jesus is a story that millions over the ages have built solid lives upon by trusting Him. Trusting their lives to the God of the Christmas story gave them the power to walk through all of life - including the injustices, tragedies, the challenges, and fears – and it still gives that power to those who will trust Him.

In the Christmas story we have a companion in Zechariah. Like you and me he asks one of the deepest questions of life: whom shall I trust? In his life’s journey he came to see the trustworthiness of God. That is my hope and prayer for you this Christmas.

***“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit,”* Romans 15:13.**

¹ Rob Burkhart, *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery* (United Methodist Pub. House, Nashville, TN, 2015)

² From Rob Burkhart, *Five Questions of Christmas ...*