

Scripture Readings and Sermon

December 12, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Luke 1:26-38

Gabriel is only found in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21 and in Luke 1:19 and 1:26. The use of Gabriel ties Jesus' birth to the Messianic predictions in Daniel. The text says that Gabriel said that Elizabeth was six months pregnant and, according to earlier verses, it was while Zacharias was serving at the Temple. According to the statement that Zacharias was of the division of Abijah and that division served on around June which means that the annunciation probably took place in December (not the birth). The term virgin is highly debated by scholars. Does it just mean a woman who has not "known" a man or does it mean a young girl who has not yet become a woman (able to bear children)? The point is not about age since girls traditionally married young in order to survive child birth. The point of the term virgin is that Mary should not have been able to have a child and yet "nothing will be impossible with God." This point is made clear with the inclusion of the reference to Elizabeth whose age suggests she was well past menopause. While the focus of the miracle is usually on the inexplicable pregnancy, the true power of the text is that Mary is given the option to say no. Unlike other miracle birth stories in the bible, this is not an answer to prayer to be initiated by God on behalf of humanity. The power God gives Mary is not the power of pregnancy but the power of free will to say yes or no. This invitation of God becomes foundational in Christian understanding of our relationship with God. The name the child is to be given is Yeshua or Jesus which comes from the same root as Joseph and Joshua. Joseph in the Old Testament saved his people from the famine and Joshua led the people into the promised land. The name Jesus foretells the role of Jesus as the deliverer or savior of his people.

Luke 1:38 "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Did Mary fully realize what she said yes to?

Would you have said yes?

When has God asked you to do the impossible?

Can even the smallest acts of faith seem at the time impossible?

Are you willing to carry the Christ child in your heart?

Commentary on Zephaniah 3:14-20

Zephaniah is one of three minor prophets who are read during the season of Advent. Like Malachi, Advent is the only time Zephaniah appears in the lectionary. Zephaniah's description of the Day of the Lord and the judgment of Jerusalem and the nations was thought to be a contributing factor in the reform movement of Josiah. Like many of the prophets, after the call to repentance and the consequences of ignoring that call, Zephaniah ends with a word of hope for the faithful. The inclusion of Zephaniah in the Advent reading is to emphasize a basic understanding of the early Church. The birth of Jesus instead of the Day of the Lord was a temporary stay of execution. Jesus came to offer us one last chance to return to God. Rather motivating people with the fear of judgment, however, Jesus gently calls us with a compassion born from love and mercy. Christmas is a renewed invitation to heed the call and come home.

Zephaniah 3:15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you ... the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

What does Jesus mean to you?

Do you accept that you have been completely forgiven?

What does it mean to walk daily with Jesus?

Can you imagine Jesus in the car, at the store, or in your living room with you?
Does this influence the way you react and what you do?

Commentary on Philippians 4:4-7

Jesus' resurrection and ascension for the early apostles meant the start of a new age. As promised in Joel, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers and the traditional way of view religion had changed. Since this new age would fully break forth when Jesus returned, the apostles rushed forth to spread the news before his return. Many of the early churches were formed with the expectation that Jesus' return was imminent. As the years passed, however, it became harder to maintain the original excitement and enthusiasm. People who came together because of faith now had to live with each other as this new "Body of Christ" or "Family of God". The letters to these new churches often included words of encouragement while Jesus' return was delayed. In this closing of Philippians, Paul encourages them to hold on to their original joy for "The Lord is near". After nearly 2000 years of waiting, the church is still called to renew that original excitement and enthusiasm as we remember Jesus' birth. It is during Christmas, the birth of Emmanuel, that we are reminded that the Lord is *still* near.

Philippians 4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Have you ever felt the presence of God in someone else?

Was it because of their gentleness, peace, or patience?

How do you feel when God is near?

Have you ever experienced the kind of peace that surpasses understanding?

How do you invite the Holy Spirit into your life every day?

When could you use a little more gentleness in your life?

Reflection on Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 1:26-38, Philippians 4:4-7

Sermon "The Lord is Near"

All three scripture chosen this week proclaim a simple and yet profound message, "The Lord is near so do not be afraid." For Paul in Philippians, this is the reason why we should rejoice at all times. The prophet Zephaniah tells the people that after the judgment there will be no more reason to fear because the Lord is in their midst. This message is also proclaimed by Gabriel to Mary, "The Lord is with you. ...Do not be afraid" in his greeting and response to Mary's confusion. It is such a simple message and yet, in the depths of our struggles and in the midst of times of stress, how easy it is to lose sight of this promise.

This last week, I have faced various challenges. My high school senior was running in six different directions typical of the time of year and our regular routine has gone out the window. My college freshman was dealing with finals and unexpected car troubles. Meanwhile, my physical and mental health has fallen below par as I become acutely aware of my wife's absence and not feeling well.

Isn't it interesting how fear can mask itself in worry. Worry over things outside of control. Worry about what may or may not happen in the future. Worry about whether we have done all that we could. All of these worries are simply the fear of losing control and failing. The message of "The Lord is with you...Do not be afraid" is drowned out by all of our worries. It is during these times when we need to turn up the volume of God's promises.

This Sunday, in the afternoon, the area community choir will be singing their Christmas cantata. Since my youngest daughter is interested in developing her singing skills, I offered to join her in participating this year. One of the songs by Pepper Choplin based on the reading from Luke is "Give

Your Fear to Faith”. The song ends with the verse “Come now and give your fear to faith, people. Give your fear to faith. God is surely with you. Do not be afraid. You have many questions, the Lord will show the way. Follow to the future. Give all your fear to faith.” When my worries this week woke me up in the middle of the night, this verse helped me re-focus on God's presence and God's power over all my worries and fears.

Christmas is celebrated in the darkest time in the northern hemisphere not because that is when Jesus was most likely born but because that is when we need him the most. During our darkest nights and coldest seasons of our lives, we need to be reminded that the Lord is near. The light of God's love and hope casts out the darkness of our worries and fears. Jesus, our Emmanuel, reveals to us that God is with us and we are never alone. We never have to face the future alone even when the stress of our lives may make us feel very alone. We need to give our fear to faith and God's perfect love in Jesus will cast out that fear. It is because God is with us in the Christ child Jesus that we can rejoice in the Lord always.