

# *Two Can Be Better Than One*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

2<sup>nd</sup> Weekend of Advent

December 9, 2012

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*Luke 1:5–25 (NIV)*

<sup>5</sup>In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup>But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<sup>8</sup>Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup>And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup>Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup>He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>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."

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

<sup>19</sup>The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup>And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup>When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

<sup>23</sup>When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup>After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup>"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

*Luke 1:34–38 (NIV)*

[When the angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary and tells her that she will have a very special baby, she is "greatly troubled."]

<sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

*My mom used to tell me that two heads are better than one. I suppose the same can be true of pregnancies – at least when it comes to Christmas.*

The Christmas story as it is usually told focuses on one mother, one pregnancy, one baby. Yet, the story of that first Christmas is actually about two mothers, two pregnancies, two babies. I suppose it is like God to ensure that even the story of Jesus' birth is chock-full of relationships.

## *The first pregnancy*

The temple in Jerusalem was the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was built around animal sacrifice; in the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. Somewhere around 6-4 BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah's department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God's sanctuary and offer up incense.<sup>1</sup> This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the LORD, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, "Don't be afraid." Zechariah's prayers were about to be answered.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives have been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman's barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, they were too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

### The Birth of John the Baptizer

By the time that Gabriel interrupts Zechariah's incense offering, the Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah. Surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God would soon end the Jews' wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John's birth precedes the announcement of his cousin's birth, so Luke tells of us John's birth before he tells us the story of Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant's circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, "What then is this child going to be?" They know, as Luke writes, that "indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John "will be called the prophet of the Most High" and "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. As the old man did his duty, an angel appeared right in front of him, promising a child. And not just any child. Many people would rejoice at their son's birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the LORD. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming LORD.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel's message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son's birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elizabeth,

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<sup>1</sup> In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the "holy of holies" in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

### *The second pregnancy*

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, probably even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. But Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her! Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne! Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God. The word "overshadow" (v. 35) translates the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all.

Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children. Finally, Gabriel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." Alan Culpepper, in his commentary on Luke, draws our

#### The Immaculate Conception

Many Protestants confuse the Christian affirmation of the Virgin Birth with the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

From the first decades after Jesus, Christians have claimed that Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of God's Holy Spirit. The importance of this claim had little to do with Mary – it was a way to affirm that Jesus was truly human. When we recite that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" in the Apostles Creed, we are affirming Jesus' genuine humanity.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not about Jesus' conception, but about Mary's! It is the belief that Mary was without original sin from the time of her own conception. It isn't hard to see how some Christians might come to such a belief as they contemplated Mary's role as the "Mother of God." Among Catholics, belief in the Immaculate Conception grew over many centuries and became official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in 1854. Pope Pius IX wrote that "the most blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin in the first instant of her conception." Nonetheless, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not affirmed by Protestants.

attention to the fact that Gabriel's reminder is in the future tense. It echoes Jesus' later declaration, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people.

Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn't visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God's story to move forward. We celebrate Advent and Christmas each year because ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph obeyed God.

So we have not one pregnancy but two. Two mothers who are cousins of some sort give birth to two babies. One will announce the coming of the Savior. One is that Savior.

Perhaps we are to grasp that when God works through us, it is literally that. It is *us*, plural not singular, two not one. It is the multiplier of relationships that is at work. But this should be no surprise to us, for we proclaim to the world that God is both three and one!

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Though Zechariah had stepped into the temple, he was not prepared to be confronted by the presence of God. He was certainly not prepared for his prayers to be answered, for surely he and his wife would never have children. Consider this. Are we prepared for God's presence in our lives? Do we really expect that our prayers will be answered? Can we see the presence of God in our midst? Two thousand years ago God burst in on the scene in a dramatic and unexpected way? What are some things we might do this Advent to help us be more prepared for God's bursting into our own lives and to trust that he does so?
2. In most UMC churches, there are typically a pretty large number of members who grew up attending a Roman Catholic church. (Why this is so is another interesting discussion topic.) When it comes to Mary, there is a substantial divide between Catholics and Protestants. Assuming there are people in your group from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, you might make a list of the varying impressions and knowledge of Mary. Why do you think Catholics are so devoted to Mary? Why have Protestants often ignored her (except at Christmas time!)? You might discuss some of the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants, such as the Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception (Mary was born without original sin), Mary's perpetual virginity (the consequence of which is the Catholic belief that Jesus had no half-siblings), and Mary's Assumption (the belief that Mary has already been bodily resurrected and glorified in heaven). Why do you think that the Roman Catholic Church would come to hold these beliefs – what is it about Mary?

### Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.  
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.  
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

#### Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

#### Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

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### Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.  
The class is often led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons."  
You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Sermon Notes

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