

**Worship Service – First Congregational UCC, Eagle River
Sunday, December 13, 2020 (Advent 3)**

L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor

Readers: Sandra and Mike Mettler, Luke Aschbrenner, Grace Florence

Keyboard: Lori Hunter

Sermon:

- I. Listening to the soloists singing our Advent songs this year has touched me
 - a. These are choral singers who usually have other singers to lean on;
 - b. But because of Covid infection, group singing is one of the riskiest things we can do, so choir has been driven apart; a huge loss for choral singers!
 - c. But some have stepped up to sing solo.
 - i. To sing solo is completely different; you're suddenly exposed; you can't make a mistake because there are no other voices to hide behind. One singer told me it took 8 recordings before she felt comfortable sending the recording in.
 - ii. But for us as listeners: the sound of someone singing alone is so pure and focused and sincere.
 1. Not the confident sound of a huge choir;
 2. But an individual voice daring to let itself be heard.
 3. Thank you each and all for daring to let yourselves be heard!
- II. There are so many things we have had to learn to do alone this year:
 - a. We're cooking our own food, exercising without a gym;
 - b. Reporters and teachers and pastors are delivering their messages to empty studios, classrooms, and churches
 - c. It can be lonely! But I think this is causing us to become more self-reliant and more **self-differentiated**;
 - d. **Self-differentiation** means we act without needing others to define or affirm us. We act from our own inner sense of truth, and hopefully by listening to God;
 - i. we try to be true to ourselves and God regardless of what others around us are doing.
- III. Today we'll hear about four characters from Jesus' birth narrative that we never get enough time with.
 - a. Notice how each of them shows "self-differentiated" faith when choosing to follow God's call and help bring Christ into the world. What can we learn from them?

Let's listen to Luke Aschbrenner read the story of Zechariah the priest, who was the father of John the Baptist: (and by the way, today is Luke's birthday, Dec. 13th!)

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:5-20

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the

commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹ The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

- IV. Zechariah was chosen by God to be the father of John the Baptist. He had prayed his whole life for a child, but was still childless. He was thought to be devout and godly.
- a. But when he was alone in the Temple, face to face with the angel Gabriel, his faith was found weak. He didn't really believe his prayers for a child could be answered.
 - b. Because of his doubt, God punished him by making him mute for the 9 months of his wife's pregnancy;
 - i. It was a time for introspection; away from leading his congregation;
 - ii. A time for nurturing the faith he would need to be the father of a prophet;
 - iii. when it was over, Zechariah reclaimed his voice, and his faith—and he did so on his own, with some help from the angel.
 - c. I can relate to Zechariah. When the quarantine started, I was unemployed. I found that I needed the quarantine spiritually, to get away from the crowd, and connect with God and God's will for me again.

What have you learned from your times of silence and isolation? Is it easier to listen to God when you're alone?

Hymn: Creator of the Stars of Night: verse 1

*Creator of the stars of night, your people's everlasting light,
O Christ, redeemer of us all, we pray you, hear us when we call.*

Now listen to Sandra tell the story of Mary when the Angel Gabriel came to her:

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,* ²⁷ *to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.* ²⁸ *And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* ²⁹ *But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.* ³⁰ *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.* ³¹ *And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.* ³² *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.* ³³ *He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."* ³⁴ *Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"* ³⁵ *The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[d] will be holy; he will be called Son of God.* ³⁶ *And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.* ³⁷ *For nothing will be impossible with God."* ³⁸ *Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

- V. Mary was young, but she seems quite self-differentiated.
 - a. She was old enough to understand the need for justice and fairness in the world, and she wanted to make a difference the way many young people do; (read about the solo she sang, the *Magnificat* starting at chapter 1:46 in Luke)
 - b. She was still innocent, in the sense that she hadn't been corrupted by other people's expectations of her;
 - c. And she was faithful enough to trust a divine voice who asked her to take a huge risk in order to bring the Messiah into the world. She names her own identity: *I am the servant of the Lord.*
 - d. She did all this on her own, with a little help from the angel

- VI. Most of us are long past Mary's stage of youthful idealism; we would be skeptical of anyone who asked us to do something so daring;
 - a. But we could all use some of that innocent trust in God; throwing caution to the wind now and then to do what you believe God made you to do.

In what part of your life might you take a risk that expresses your true nature and your idealism, in order to help bring Christ closer to the world?

Hymn: Creator of the Stars of Night: verse 2

*To you the deep travail was known that made the whole creation groan.
You came, O Savior, to set free your own in glorious liberty.*

Let's listen to Luke again, reading the story of Joseph of Nazareth:

Scripture Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁹ *Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.* ²⁰ *But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of*

the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

- VII. When Joseph was awake, he had a clear plan that seemed logical, judicious, and moral. He was trying to protect himself and his fiancé’s reputation by quietly walking away from the marriage.
- a. But in sleep, his mind went to a less logical place: he heard a voice (the angel Gabriel again) that led him in a different direction: to risk shame and disgrace by marrying a pregnant girl and raising someone else’s child as his own.
 - b. Maybe in the quiet of his dreams, he realized he loved Mary. Instead of listening to the cultural norms around him, he listened to the voices of angels and ancient prophets and his own heart.
 - c. That kind of decision takes a very self-differentiated person, to tune out the criticism he would face from all sides.
 - d. But Joseph stuck to that decision despite it making his own life more complicated and dangerous.
 - e. It is so much easier to go along with what the culture says is normal, than to do what feels right to you.
 - f. Maybe, like Joseph, you’re someone who has chosen to form a family in a different way than the norm.
 - g. Some families may not look “normal” to others; and they may even be called immoral by others.
 - h. But we choose our families using our hearts, not our brains! We listen to that voice from the Spirit that directs us to the people we are meant to love.
 - i. Maybe Joseph had to be asleep to be awoken to his love for Mary.

Has God ever called you to do something that didn’t really make sense, simply out of love?

Hymn: Creator of the Stars of Night: verse 3

*When this old world drew on toward night, you came, but not in splendor bright,
Not as a monarch, but the child of Mary, blameless mother mild.*

Finally, let’s hear Sandra circle back to Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:24-25, 39-45

²⁴ After those days {Zechariah’s} wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

³⁹ *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

- VIII. Elizabeth had given up on ever having children. And then, when she DID get pregnant, her husband didn't really believe this miracle was happening!
- a. But Elizabeth did NOT doubt her own blessedness. In fact, in vs. 25, she makes it clear that this miracle was from God.
 - i. She expressed a self-differentiated faith in the God who can make all things possible.
 - b. But her story is a little different from the others;
 - i. Even though both Mary and Elizabeth had faith separately in their impossible pregnancies, it was when they met in person that the miracle was powerfully affirmed,
 - ii. then the baby John leaped in his mother's womb!
 - iii. When the two women came out of their seclusion to greet each other, an incredible spiritual power came over them
- IX. While each of these biblical characters brings a strong individual faith, that faith is magnified *when they connect with each other*: Mary with Elizabeth, Zechariah with his congregation and his wife, Joseph with Mary.
 - i. This teaches me it's important to grow a self-differentiated faith,
 - ii. But also, when we connect with others to express our shared faith in God, amazing, impossible miracles happen.
- X. Even in this time of quarantine, God is finding ways to strengthen us as individual Christians AND connect us as God's people;
 - i. Think about the interesting things you've learned from being alone;
 - ii. And all the interesting new ways you are connecting with others
- XI. Quarantine is teaching us that our separation from each other does not necessarily weaken us. Yes, we are "stronger together", but we can also become stronger apart, so that when we do come back together, each voice in the choir will be sweeter, purer, and the whole choir will sing more beautifully than ever before!

Hymn: Creator of the Stars of Night: verse 4

*At your great name, O Jesus, now all knees must bend, all hearts must bow;
All things on earth with one accord, like those in heaven shall call you Lord.*