

Luke 1: 39-55
Creekside COB
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“Love Makes a Promise”

No sooner had the winners in the recent mid-term elections been announced, than the political pundits began speculating about who would run in the 2008 presidential election. It's hard for me to get enthused about 2008 while we are dealing with issues resulting from the election of 2006, but there are historic possibilities on the horizon that are interesting. On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, a woman or an African American may be their party's pick.

Recently on National Public Radio there was a discussion of race and gender in politics. The question was, “Are Americans ready to elect either a woman or an African-American to the presidency? Who are we more likely to elect first, a black president or a woman president?”

Some people hold fast to the old gender stereotypes. They might say we cannot elect a woman to the presidency because women aren't tough enough. In the middle of hard-nosed international negotiations the president cannot burst into tears. You know how women are—they get so emotional. When an international crisis arises we need someone who is controlled under pressure and can act logically rather than emotionally. And what would happen if the president got pregnant? A pregnant first lady is one thing, but a pregnant president? That is really something to think about.

In the Bible there is a recurring theme. God makes promises that cannot be kept unless a child is born, but the ones to whom the promise is made cannot have children because they are either too old or are barren. God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens. But both Abraham and Sarah were pushing one hundred years old. The notion that she would become pregnant was so preposterous that Sarah broke

out laughing at the angel who bore the message. God asked people to believe in promises that only God, and not they themselves could fulfill. Humanly speaking, there was nothing for them to do but trust and obey.

In Luke 1 we are introduced to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. He is a priest, and she is a descendant of Aaron. They were righteous people... so righteous that Luke says they were blameless in the sight of the Lord. They took everything to God in prayer, including their desire to have children. But after years of praying and no offspring, they gave up. They were now too old. They stopped shopping for cribs long ago and started pricing walkers.

Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred and fearful room in the temple. They believed that the presence of God Almighty dwelled there. It wasn't just a ceremonial rite. The prospect of standing in the very presence of God was a terrifying thing. Terrible things could happen if the priest didn't enter the Holy of Holiness with a right spirit. As Zechariah entered, many on the outside prayed. Just as he was ready to place the incense, an angel appeared before him. Luke says, "Fear fell upon him."

After the angel told Zechariah to calm down, he said. "God has heard your prayer. You and the Mrs. will conceive. You'll have a son and his name will be John." Zechariah replied, "But Elizabeth and I aren't spring chickens. How will I know this is true?" For asking that question, the angel zipped Zechariah's lip and he wouldn't be able to say a word until his son's first cry.

Think about it... a prophet who cannot speak. He has a dandy of a story to tell but he can't tell it. It is as if the angel said, "We've heard enough of you for a while." Elizabeth's husband can't talk, and Mary's husband-to-be, Joseph, doesn't talk. For someone who plays such an important part in the Christmas drama, you would think he had something to say. But we don't hear a peep from Joseph.

Months later the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would have a son. It's interesting that her response to Gabriel is almost the same as Zechariah's. He said, "How shall I know this? I'm an old man." Mary said, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" But Gabriel didn't zip Mary's lips shut. Only the women get to do the talking.

When Mary learned that her relative Elizabeth was also pregnant, she went to meet her. The young and pregnant one greets the old and pregnant one. Elizabeth's son leaps for joy in her womb and she is overcome with the Holy Spirit. Praises flow like fountains from Mary and Elizabeth. Both are utterly amazed at what has happened to them. They don't compare how round their tummies are, or complain about back pains or swollen ankles.

No, these women have important things to say. They are all "emotional"—laughing and crying and singing about the fact that the world as it is, is not the world as God wants it to be. The Son of the Most High will be born to a humble young woman with no power or influence. When his time comes, there will be a shakeup.

Did you hear that the CEO of one of the big corporations was given a \$53 million bonus because the stockholders are happy with his performance that made them money? Apparently they have not heard Mary and Elizabeth carrying on. *"He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones."* Emotional Mary and Elizabeth prophesy that God doesn't look kindly upon a world where few at the top control the world's resources while the majority of people in the world never have enough. *"He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."*

During a discussion in a college class called, "Population and Environment," a classmate said, "I don't think it is right to bring a child into a world as messed up as this one is." Given the proliferation of war, terrorism, hunger, and global warming, that

is a reasoned, rational thought. I've heard this kind of thinking before, and the ones who say it are always men.

Someone said, "A pregnant president wouldn't be a bad thing; for I know of no one has higher expectations for the future of the planet, who is fiercer in wanting to protect the vulnerable, who is more heroically hopeful about the world, than those who are pregnant."

Those who believe that only men are allowed to speak and lead in the church better take notice. In the story that marks our way to Bethlehem, it is the women who point us to the mysterious ways of God while the men sit and don't say a word.

In these opening verses Luke pushes practicality and rationality aside to open our eyes to the marvel and mystery of God's ways.

National Public Radio has airs a series of essays by people from all walks of life called, "This I Believe." Recently a Jesuit monk named Richard Rohr declared, "I believe in mystery." He said, "Life has taught me to love mystery and not feel the need to change it or make it un-mysterious. This has put me at odds with many other believers I know who seem to need explanations for everything... Whenever I want to say "only" or "always," someone or something proves me wrong. We love closure, resolution and clarity, while thinking we are people of "faith"! How strange that the very word "faith" has come to mean its exact opposite."

Continue reading Luke 1 from verse 57 and you will find that Elizabeth has had her baby. All her friends and family have come to the house for the circumcision. They tried to name him Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth said, "No, his name is John." "But you don't have any relatives named John. They looked to Zechariah, wanting to know what he would call the boy. He wrote on a piece of paper, "His name is John," and at that moment he could again speak. That gave everyone something to talk about.

I don't know how long it will be before we have a pregnant president. But on this Christmas Eve morning we remember the witness of two pregnant prophets who told us about the people and the situations that need our love and attention, and the God who deserves our praise at Christmas.