

November 29, 2015  
The Christmas Questions  
*How Can I be Sure?*  
Luke 1:5-18

**Opening words:** Our world values answers; I believe in questions. So did the famous French enlightenment writer Voltaire. He once wrote, *"Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers."* A good question is priceless because it simply means you want to understand. Good questions are the key to understanding our world; good questions are the key to understanding our faith. I believe, God expects us to ask questions because God wants us to understand his mysterious ways. My 2015 Advent/Christmas sermon series revolves around some of the finest questions ever asked.

In my next six messages I will look at these questions:

How can I be sure?  
How can this be?  
Why am I so favored?  
What will this child become?  
What child is this?  
Where is the child?

Today, we begin with the first question, how can I be sure? It comes from the first chapter of Luke, verses five through eighteen. May God give you ears to hear.

**Luke 1:5-18** <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."

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The noted British philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, "*The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.*" If you can find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We begin our sermon series in the first chapter of Luke. The date of the story is approximately 6 BC. The main character in this story is Zechariah. The scripture tells us two things about him. First, he was from the priestly line of Abijah. Second, he was married to a woman by the named of Elizabeth. As a couple, they were both faithful and sincere. Yet, in spite of this fact, they were cursed by God through the eyes of their generation; they had no children. In their time children were seen as a great blessing. The more children a couple had, the greater the blessing. The fewer children a couple had, the smaller the blessing. Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children. They must have been seen as accursed. Verse seven tells us they were advanced in years. That means they will never have children. Their exact age is unknown; I believe they were fifty-eight (smile). They had accepted and adjusted to this major disappointment. They would have to find joy in their nieces and nephews. But, this is the Bible, and in the Bible, as in life, it isn't over until God says it's over.

For years, I heard this story and assumed it was just another day in Zechariah's life. I was wrong! It was a red letter day in his life. The lot of performing the priestly act of burning the incense at the Holy of Holies had fallen on him. Lots were needed because there were so many from his line. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity. He must have played it out in his mind a million times, but he still wasn't prepared for what was about to happen. He thinks he is alone, but he is not. An angel is with him. In the Bible, angels are not protectors, they are messengers. An unnamed angel tells Zechariah his prayers have been heard and will soon be answered. He and Elizabeth are going to be parents! She will give birth to a baby boy and they will name him John. He will live a spirit-filled life and will do many great things in the sight of God. The angel must have assumed Zechariah would be filled with joy. He must have been surprised to discover that he was filled with doubt. Verse eighteen says, "*Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.'*" You cannot blame him. (He was fifty-eight years old.) By that age you are supposed to be a grandparent, not a parent. The question is rooted in doubt. Has anyone here ever doubted God? Has anyone here ever asked the question, "how can this be?" I have never met a single person who never doubted God. I have never met a person who has not asked that question.

The question that haunts this text is this one: why did Zechariah doubt? Why did Zechariah have to ask the question, "how can I be sure of this?" You can't blame the unnamed angel. There is no sign of poor communication. The message was stated clearly in Zechariah's own tongue, with perfect diction. There is no sign in the text the message itself was unclear. There were not too many words or too few words. The announcement was perfect. The only one to blame for Zechariah's question was Zechariah. He doubted for the same reason so many doubt today. He took his eyes off of God. You really can't blame him; he was not the first one, nor was he the last.

It is easy to take your eyes off of God. Our world is filled with so many distractions. A very few are sinister in nature. The majority of the distractions are harmless. How many good things in life distract you from keeping your eyes on God daily? Every day God gives us 1,440 minutes a day. How many of those minutes do you spend looking at God? How many of you are like Zechariah?

Zechariah took his eyes off of God because he was distracted by his insecurities. What does the text say? It says Zechariah was in the most holy place in the temple, the place where they believed God lived. It should have been easy to keep his eyes on God, but it wasn't. When the message was delivered that he is going to be a father at his advanced age (58), his eyes look naturally inward. Zechariah should have said, "Praise be to God!" Instead he says, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." In other words, he forgets about our all-mighty and powerful God and thinks about human limitations. Does anyone here have any personal insecurities? You are too young or old, too tall or short, too loud or quiet. Maybe you are trying to recover from some past failure or deficiency? Zechariah's insecurity was his age; he was too old. His age distracted him and he took his eyes off of God. Everyone has a personal insecurity. What is yours? Our personal insecurities distract us from keeping our eyes on God!

Zechariah took his eyes off of God because of his relationships. His wife was well along in years. Maybe she was 57? Einstein once said, *"Physics is easy. Relationships are complex."* That is very true. You have just spent Thanksgiving with family and friends. How complex are the relationships in your life? How much time do you spend with the people in your life? Your parents are aging and need constant care. Your children are outgoing and always need to be somewhere. Your friend needs to talk or needs help moving. You love the people in your life, but they eat up all your time. There is no time left for you; there is no time left for God. We love the people in our lives, but they distract us from keeping our eyes on God!

Zechariah could have been distracted by his responsibilities. The text tells us he was a priest. That was a respected position in his society. People expected things from him and he didn't want to let them down. Has anyone here ever been overwhelmed by responsibility? Does anyone here feel like the entire world depends on you? You have to go to work every day. Your house has to be maintained and cleaned. Your bills have to be paid. The dog has to be walked and the litter box needs cleaned. Have you ever felt taken for granted because no one else seems to do anything? Our responsibilities can distract us from keeping our eyes on God! If you find some truth in these three distractions, say, **"Amen!"**

From generation to generation, keeping our eyes on God has always been a great challenge. Zechariah was not unique; you are not unique. Generally speaking, every generation has failed, so every generation has doubted. That is why every generation has asked God the question of the day, "how can I be sure?" There is no simple remedy to this dilemma. It all distills down to another question: do you want to keep your eyes

on God? Not everyone does. If you do, then I challenge you to make an appointment with God every day. I don't care when you make your appointment with God. It may be early in the morning or late at night. I don't care what you do during your appointment. You can read the Bible, pray or meditate. However, I would encourage you to spend more time listening to God than talking to God. When was the last time you spent time with God? That may explain why you have your doubts. That may explain why you regularly ask the question of the day, "how I can be sure?" I don't want to sound like a preacher, but I don't understand people who don't want to spend time with God. Let's be honest. We all need God because life is hard. I need all the help I can get.

Earlier this week, I officiated at a funeral at one of our local funeral homes. They called me because the deceased hadn't been to church in years, so he didn't have a minister. There are many who fit that description. The night before the service, I went in to visit the family. They were nice people devastated by the sudden passing. It was painfully difficult for them to talk to me. The deceased was sixty-three years old and a product of this area - hard-working and family oriented. He earned his education degree from Youngstown State, but drove a truck for a living, retiring about a year ago. He loved the Pittsburgh Pirates, high school football, and never missed any of his grandchildren's activities. I have officiated at countless funerals through the years, but this one was hard. I found the hearts of this good man's grieving loved ones to be crushed. No background music was played and no one talked. I broke the silence with my words. I tried to offer them words of hope, yet their grieving drowned them out. When the service was over, I stood back and watched the family take their last viewing. The widow went last, the sons went first. With red-rimmed eyes the sons and their wives stood by the Pirate-themed casket, speechless. Their children, the deceased's grandchildren, stood silently by trying to draw some kind of strength from their parents.

The oldest grandchild grabbed my heart. He must have been about twelve years old. It is hard being twelve years old. I wouldn't be twelve years old again, if I could. At twelve years old you are trying to find yourself. You aren't a child, you aren't an adult. You are twelve years old. If I were God, no one would lose their grandfather at twelve years old. This twelve-year-old did something I never expected. As he stood next to his father viewing his grandfather, the loss became too much. His emotions boiled up and he looked to his father. Without warning, he lifted his arms in the air like he was a toddler that wanted to be held. He was twelve years old; his hands were higher in the air than his father stood. His father grabbed him and strained to pick him up. A minute later, he put him down and the twelve-year-old composed himself. I can't get that scene out of my mind. I thought about it the rest of the week. Can I ask you a question? Is there anyone here who would like to be picked up and held? Isn't it time you made an appointment with God?

Will you pray with me?