

December 6, 2015

The Christmas Questions

How Can this Be?

Luke 1:26-38

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.

Let week, we began by looking at Zechariah's question, *How can I be sure?* It is a question that is rooted in doubt. Today, we look at Mary's question, *How can this be?* It is a question that is rooted in humility. Our scripture reading for today is familiar. We hear Luke 1:26-38 annually. The words draw an emotional response from us; they are like visiting an old friend.

Luke 1:26-38 ²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The 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. ³⁶Even 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. ³⁷For no word from God will ever fail." ³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

The early church leader Augustine was once accosted by a heathen who showed him his idol and said, "Here is my god; where is thine?" Augustine replied, "I cannot show you my God; not because there is no God to show but because you have no eyes to see Him." That leads us to an interesting question. When was the last time you saw God? Perhaps, this is a more pointed question. How big is your God? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

This morning we find ourselves once again in the first chapter of Luke. The background of the text should be familiar. Six months had passed since Zechariah and Elizabeth had conceived. They must have been filled with both excitement and fear. God was going to do great things through them. They didn't have a clue God was doing greater things through their niece, Mary. You may have heard of her in the past. She lived in the small town of Nazareth and was really nothing more than a child herself. If you imagine Mary being a twenty-five year old woman with blond hair and blue eyes, then you are wrong. She was a teenager with dark middle-eastern eyes and complexion. Being a product of her time and location, she dreamed of being both a respected wife and mother. God had a slightly different plan for her. That is where the story really begins to speak to us.

According to verse 26, God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary. His words turned her life upside down. Like her Aunt Elizabeth, she was also going to conceive. That is not so hard to believe. It was biologically possible. What made it impossible was her virginity. Let me say it bluntly. She had never had sex. Jane the Virgin was not the first one, Mary was. Mary hears the message and can't believe her ears. She is going to have a baby! After she hears the message she asks the question of the day, "How can this be?" You really can't blame her. The world has been wrestling with the virgin birth for over two thousand years; how can one expect Mary to accept it in a matter of seconds? Never underestimate the significance of the virgin birth. It is extremely important. Jesus was half man and half God.

The world has been uncomfortable with the virgin birth for a long time. Some have tried to dismiss the virgin birth and have called it a lie. According to them, Joseph was the biological father of Jesus. At some point Mary and Joseph found some time to be alone. They do what young lovers always do, and Jesus is conceived. They say the virgin birth theme was created to protect Mary's reputation. Some try to dismiss the virgin birth by redefining the virgin birth. They say "virgin" simply means "young girl". Mary was a young girl so she was a virgin. Still others say the virgin birth isn't important, so there is no need to talk about it. It is only mentioned in Matthew and Luke. Why isn't it mentioned in Mark and John? Yet, the virgin birth is important. Luke understood that fact and almost goes out of his way to stress it. He mentions it three times in these twelve verses. It is mentioned twice in verse twenty-seven and once in verse thirty-four. Why is the virgin birth so important? It means the child Mary conceived did not come from a man; the child Mary conceived came from God. The Holy Spirit came upon her. No wonder Mary asks the question, how can this be so? Mary is reminded that God has the ability to work outside of boundaries. If you believe God has the power to work outside of normal boundaries, say, "**Amen!**"

On Tuesday night, I held my first gathering of our book study, *The Questions of Christmas*. There are about ten in the group and we met in the parlor. I do these studies periodically for three reasons. First, I want to cover the material. Second, I want people to get to know one another. Our church has grown, and with three services it is impossible to know everyone. Third, I like spending time with you. I find it more fun to

talk about God than to talk about church fundraisers and politics. The topics of last week's chapter was trust, based on the story of Zechariah. I was surprised how quickly the group formed. Everyone shared and had a different perspective. Some people asked questions. Someone asked me the question, "Russ, do you fear God?" It was an excellent question. I do not know how you can't fear God. Someday, we are all going to be judged by God. We will be judged for the things we have done, our sins of commission. We will be judged for the things we should have done, our sins of omission. I am more concerned about the things I should have done. Let me ask you the same question.

Do you fear God? I have no research to support this next line. It is simply my opinion. I do not believe our generation fears God as much as earlier generations. I think the reason is obvious. We get a steady diet about God's love for us. I am not being critical, I am being honest. Megachurches have been built on this theology. No one tires of hearing about how much God loves them. Joel Osteen and others have found a million ways to tell you that God loves you. Their message is not wrong; God does love us. However, their message is out of balance. God expects you to be more than a receptacle of His love. He expects you to do live up to your potential and do something with your life. In the story for today, God didn't just love Mary, He gave her a job. Let there be no doubt about it. God loves you, but also expects you to do something with your life. This is the question everyone must answer. What is God expecting you to do with your life?

Our generation's problem is rooted in two things. First, we live in arrogant times. Many believe God is accountable to them. Do you know of anyone who is mad at God? I find those people to be exhausting. If you want to be mad at God then be mad at God. He can handle it. Second, our generation seems to have a small view of God. He is not much more than an old man in a rocking chair. Never forget it: God is God. God is all knowing, all powerful, ever present, unchanging, holy, righteous, and sovereign, and so much more. When Mary asked the question, "How can this be", she was overwhelmed by the power of God. She asked the question in humility because she understood the vastness of God. How big is your understanding of God? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Several weeks ago, Kathryn and I went to Niagara Falls. Like Washington DC, it is a place that you must go. I hope you have been there at some time in your life. Niagara Falls is really made up of three falls, the Horseshoe Falls, the American Falls and the Bridal Veil Falls. The Horseshoe Falls has been the official boundary between the United States and Canada since 1819. Erosion means that boundary is always in flux. The Niagara River, which drains Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, feeds the falls. I find the natural power of Niagara Falls to be haunting. When I stand near the edge, there is something that challenges me to jump in. Have you ever felt that way at Niagara Falls? I will be honest with you.

It wasn't my first trip to Niagara Falls. I have been there several times in the past. I remember going with my parents when I was about ten years old. I have good memories of that trip. I went to Niagara Falls with friends the summer I graduated from high school. We had fun, maybe too much fun. I went before I met Kathryn. Memories of that trip are upsetting. Kathryn and I went back when our girls were young. That was a good trip for my family. Kathryn and I went alone this time. It is always the best when we are alone. I hope to take my granddaughter, Pippa, someday. I have seen the falls several times. I know they are eroding but I don't see it. Niagara Falls is always the same. Only my life has changed.

Do you know what I can't get my mind around? The water has been flowing over the falls 24/7 for centuries. I do not know when it began, no one does. The Native Americans told the Europeans about the falls hundreds of years ago, but not even the Native Americans saw the first drop of water go over the edge. It is almost like the world was created with Niagara Falls in place. It is like the world, itself, has been changing but Niagara Falls remains the same. I find that thought to be humbling. Just think about it. The water is flowing right now producing that unique sound and mist. The water was flowing at the moment I was born. There is an excellent chance the water will be flowing when I die. I will be gone, but Niagara Falls will remain. The falls are timeless. Let me take one more step.

Niagara Falls moves me spiritually. I don't know how you can look at the falls and not think about God. They are so massive and powerful, yet it is only a creation of God. He is much bigger. Looking at Niagara Falls is like peeking behind the curtain of a theatrical production. You can see a little, but there is so much more. We live in arrogant times, but we are not equal to God. We are nothing in comparison to God. If you stand next to God then you will discover what Mary discovered, you are nothing. Yet, in spite of this divine truth, God loves us. I find that fact to be incredible. Mary never went to Niagara Falls, yet she asked the question all humble Christians ask, "How can this be?" How big is your understanding of God?