

December 13, 2015

The Christmas Questions

Why am I So Favored?

Luke 1:39-45

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. Each one is found in the Nativity. I have called this series *The Christmas Questions*.

We began looking at these questions two weeks ago. Do you remember? Zechariah's question of doubt was *How can I be sure?* Last week, we looked at Mary question of humility, *How can this be?* Today, the scripture focuses on Elizabeth's question, *Why am I so favored?* It showed her resilience. Our scripture lesson for today is Luke 1:39-45.

Luke 1:39-45 ³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

One of Aesop's fables tells of a mighty oak tree and a humble reed standing side on side at the edge of a river. From time to time they spoke, but they were far from friends. The reason was simple. The mighty oak considered himself superior to the humble reed. One day the oak, from his towering height, spoke to the reed. He said, "Look at you! You have no pride. You bend and bow at the slightest breeze. You should be more dignified and proud, like I am. You should stand erect, as I do. No wind can blow that will make me stoop or lower myself. But look at you. How weak you are!" Just about that time, a great storm began to rage, with wind, lightning and rain. At first, the oak withstood the storm, but soon his stiffness became his undoing. The mighty oak fell into the river, broken into many pieces. Meanwhile, the reed plant swayed with the wind and received no damage. What does the fable teach us? It is really the story of pride verses humility. However, it teaches us much more. It teaches us about one of the most useful Christian qualities – resilience.

What does resilience really mean? It's a big word with a bigger meaning. Webster defines resilience as the ability to spring back; the strength to bounce back; to return to original form after being bent or compressed. It means buoyancy, the ability to recover quickly from illness, depression or adversity. It is not a weakness, it is a strength. Do the people in your life consider you resilient? Do you consider yourself resilient? That word, resiliency, is modeled for us in the scripture lesson for today. If you are ready to look at this morning's text say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves this morning in the first chapter of Luke. When we last left Mary, she was told she was going to have a baby. That should always be good news, but it wasn't. The reason is easy to see. Morals mean very little to our generation, but to Mary's generation they meant a great deal. Don't spiritualize Mary, just read the words. She is a single pregnant woman who lived in a small town. In her time, Nazareth had a population of between 100 and 400 people. Have you ever lived in a small town? Have you ever worshipped in a small membership church? Everyone knows everyone else. Everyone knows everyone's business. That means everyone in her life is talking about her unwanted pregnancy. To her world and ours, the virgin birth is hard to accept. There is no doubt about it, she is the hot topic at the well. That means the best thing she could do was escape Nazareth. She had few options - one was going to visit her Aunt Elizabeth for some unconditional love. The scripture lesson for today tells us of their reunion.

There is a cruel side to this story. Through the eyes of the world, Elizabeth had done nothing wrong. However, she had waited her entire life for a baby. That fact is hard to overlook. To her generation, not having a child was not just disappointing, it was devastating. It was like a scandal that wouldn't go away. Zechariah and Elizabeth must have asked the questions a million times. What are we doing wrong? What have we done wrong? Why hasn't God granted us just one child? Luke 1:7 pours salt into Elizabeth's open wound, "They had no children, because *Elizabeth* was barren." Those were sexist times; the woman was always the reason for infertility. There is no reason to think Zechariah wasn't the problem. Elizabeth had every reason to be bitter, yet, in this story, there is no sign of bitterness. A lesser person would have grown bitter from the disappointment, causing harm to herself and others. Yet, Elizabeth is not bitter. Elizabeth welcomed Mary into her home and offers her what she needed the most, unconditional love. Let there be no doubt about it, Elizabeth was resilient. Her question summarized her resilient spirit, "Why am I so favored?" If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Do the people in your life consider you resilient? If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ then you must be resilient. After all, your faith has to withstand all the storms of this world. How many storms have you endured? In my position in life, I work with people who weather all kinds of storms. There is the storm of death and disease. There is the storm of depression and anxiety. There is the storm of loneliness and fear. There is the storm of aging and youth. There is the storm of hopelessness and uncertainty. There is

an endless list because life is filled with all kinds of storms. What storm are you in the midst of right now? The major issue in life is not how to eliminate the storms; the major issue in life is how to survive the storms. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

On February 12, 2010, the nation was informed of another mass shooting. The shooter's name was Amy Bishop. There was nothing stereotypical about her. She was a high achiever as a child, who excelled at the violin. She had received her Ph.D. from Harvard, and had completed her postdoctoral work at the Harvard School of Public Health. She was a mother of four, whose marriage was stable. She had taught at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, where she had been denied tenure. That last fact triggered the whole tragic event. In the middle of a department meeting she opened fire, killing three and injuring three others. That event opened investigations into other events in her past, which led to more convictions. Today, she is serving a life sentence in Alabama. Whenever I read or hear about cases like Amy Bishop's, I have to ask the question, "Why?" I understand being denied tenure at a university is a big deal, but is it worth taking the life of others? Is it worth ruining your own life? The story of Amy Bishop is extreme but it is not rare.

How many people do you know who have ruined their lives because they haven't been able to move past some disappointment? How many people that you know have ruined some relationship in their lives because they haven't been able to move past some event in their past? That is what I love about Elizabeth. She moved past all those years of disappointment and embraced Mary. She got the most out of that day. There is no other way to say it, Elizabeth was resilient. You can hear it in her question, "Why I am I so favored?" Do the people in your life consider you resilient? Or, are you holding onto some disappointing event in your past? As your pastor, I want you to get over it and get the most out of today. *This is the day the Lord has given you, let us rejoice and be glad in it.* If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

In my opinion, the greatest person in the history of the world was Roger Adams. He was not a political or military leader; he was not an educator or entertainer. His name was never found in the headlines of any newspaper. Roger Adams was the greatest person in the history of the world for one reason, he was my grandfather. I know I am prejudiced about him, but he was a great man. He had the ability to find the best in any person or situation. He had the ability to make everyone feel like they were his best friend. He believed in helping strangers. He could find the fun in any boring situation and he could tell a story like no one else. He dreamed of going into the ministry but he never had the opportunity. I get to live the dream for both of us. Let me say it again proudly. In my opinion, the greatest person in the history of the world was my grandfather, Roger Adams.

The truth be told, I only remember him near the end of his life. I will never forget the Christmas Day my brother-in-law had to carry him into our family home because he was too weak. That would be his last Christmas. Months later, he would die and I learned

about a new side of my grandfather. I remember him as kind and fun-loving, but there was a sad side. Born in 1893, he was the older of two children born to my great-grandparents, Eli and Maria Adams. They lived on the Adams farm in Pierpont, in extreme northeast Ohio, due south of Conneaut. He was the first in my family to get a high school diploma. There were no high schools in Pierpont, so he had to travel to Jefferson, where he stayed with family friends during the week. One Sunday night his mother was taking him to Jefferson. I don't really know the details, but the unthinkable happened. Their horse and buggy was hit by a train, killing his mother and their friend. Roger was thrown from the buggy and had a severely broken leg. The doctor recommended the leg be amputated. His father, my great-grandfather said, "No!" He spent the next year of his life in bed with a sandbag on his leg. It is for this reason I never remembered him walking without a limp. After high school he traveled with a Chautauqua group and played the violin. In that group he met and married a young woman from Greenville, PA, Orbie Dart. They settled in Ashtabula, Ohio and welcomed three children, my father, Ronald, my Uncle Carlisle and my Aunt Phyllis. The family struggled economically during the Great Depression, losing several businesses. They celebrated when their two sons, my father, Ronald, and my uncle Carlisle, came home from the Second World War safely. Finally, with that bad leg, he got a good job working at the docks in Ashtabula harbor. After all those years of struggling things began to look up, and then tragedy struck again. Early in 1950, my grandmother was preparing lunch after church, when she had a fatal heart attack. My father said my grandfather fell into a great depression because he had lost the love of his life. It took him several years to come out of it. And when he did, he lived life to the fullest. It was like the hardship taught him how to live. He embraced every moment and loved every person. There is no other way to say it. My grandfather, the greatest person in the history of the world, was resilient. Like Elizabeth, he endured one storm after another, but he never broke. I loved my grandfather because he never stopped loving life. Can I ask you a question?

Do the people in your life consider you resilient? Are you more like the mighty oak? Are you more like the humble reed? My grandfather was not unique. Life is filled with storms. What storm are you facing at this moment? Are you going to be trampled by the storm, or are you going to weather the storm? How resilient are you? American author Sheri Dew once said, *"Indeed, this life is a test. It is a test of many things – our convictions and priorities, our faith and our faithfulness, our patience and our resilience, and in the end, our ultimate desires."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**