

December 20, 2015

The Christmas Questions
What Will this Child Become?
Luke 1:57-66

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.

We began this sermon series on Thanksgiving weekend. Our first question was Zechariah's question of doubt, *How can I be sure?* The next question was Mary's question of humility, *How can this be?* Last week, we looked at Elizabeth's question of resiliency, *Why am I so favored?* On Thursday evening, Christmas Eve, we will look at the greatest question, *What child is this?* Today, however, we look at the crowd's question of potential, *What will this child become?* Our scripture reading for today is Luke 1:57-66.

Luke 1:57-66 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

In a small village in Sweden lived a young girl who was terribly poor and unskilled, so she could get along only by doing the most menial of jobs. She loved to sing, and despite her poverty, she dreamed of someday being a great singer. She began to sing on street corners, hoping passersby would toss her a coin or two. Each day she sang -- in wind and rain, heat or cold, yet barely had enough at the end of the day to buy food. Some in the village protested to the town council that it wasn't right for children to be on the street in rags, begging, yet no one did anything to help her. Her life changed in an instant. One day a great musician happened to pass by and hear her.

He was entranced by her beautiful voice. He took the ragged urchin home with him and began to teach her how to use her glorious voice to its fullest. In time, she became the toast of two continents and everyone knew and loved Jenny Lind, "The Swedish Nightingale."

I love that story because it teaches us about the importance of potential. What is potential? Webster defines it as, "existing in possibility". Potential is a funny thing. It is one thing to be full of potential; it is something completely different to live up to your potential. Do you know of anyone who failed to live up to their potential? Do you feel like you have lived up to your potential? If that last question makes you feel uncomfortable, then say, "**Amen!**" Let us look at this morning's scripture lesson together.

Once again, we find ourselves in the first chapter of Luke. The entire chapter is committed to the pre-birth stories of John and Jesus. In one way they are similar; in other ways they are light years apart. Both of their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, conceived with divine help. Elizabeth was too old; Mary was too innocent. Both babies were born for a specific reason: one was the forerunner of the Messiah; the other was the Messiah. In a few days we will remember the birth of Jesus. This morning we will remember the birth of John.

According to the text, John's life began with joy. Verse 58 says, everyone was filled with joy in that little corner of the world, both family members and friends. And why not? The miraculous had happened. After years of waiting, Zachariah and Elizabeth welcomed their first born into the world, a boy. God had truly done a mighty thing! Everyone assumed they would name their son Zechariah. It was the common practice to name the first born after his father. However, you know what they say about assuming. Everyone assumed wrong. It was the custom to name the baby boy at his circumcision, when the child was eight days old. However, instead of hearing the assumed name, Zechariah, they heard the unexpected name, John. It was no one else's business, yet everyone had an opinion. It was like when Kim Kardashian named her baby "Saint". No one seemed to like it, but no one had the power to change it. In spite of his world's opinion, his name was John. What does John mean? It means "God is gracious." No wonder everyone asked the question of the day, "What will this child become?" Have you ever held a baby and asked the same question?

The rose on the altar this morning is in honor of the birth of Henry Aaron Roller. He was born a week ago Wednesday, December 9. He weighed 7 lb.12 oz. He is a lucky young man because he entered a wonderful family. Adam and Carrie are wonderful parents and he has an older brother and two older sisters. I am hoping to see him later this morning. It will be my first time. I usually rush to the hospital to see newborns, but I was unable to go because I was sick. I didn't want to give little Henry my big cold. I feel bad I missed his introduction, because newborns are so special. Everyone has to count their ten fingers and toes. Everyone has to touch their soft skin and kiss their

little head. Everyone has to gaze into the baby's face and long to see the baby's eyes. Everyone has to peek under that little cap to witness those few strands of hair. And, everyone has to smile and ask the question, what will this child become? The scene has been played out time and time again, but it never grows old.

On the day you were born, people came to see you. They counted your ten fingers and toes. They touched your soft skin and kissed you. They took an inventory of your hair and asked the question, what will this baby become? It is a question of potential. Do you feel like you are living up to your full potential? That leads us to three interesting questions. This is the first one.

Are your parents still proud of you? Several years ago, I was asked by a local funeral home to officiate for a woman who was well over one hundred years old. As usual, I went to the funeral home the night before to meet the family. The deceased had two children, a boy and a girl. The deceased was over one hundred, so her children were about eighty. We sat in the corner and chatted about her. In her day she was quite a woman; she loved everyone and everyone loved her. When I was done I prayed with them and said, "Good-bye." As I was walking out, the son called to me. He asked if we could talk alone in the parking lot. He was a distinguished gentleman wearing an expensive three-piece suit. Standing next to his expensive car he said, "I have to tell you something. My mother was never proud of me!" He began to tear up and wiped his nose with a linen handkerchief. I asked, "Why? You seem like a really good guy who has known success." He said, "You don't understand. My mother always wanted me to be a doctor. I am a lawyer."

Don't tell me your parent's approval doesn't matter. Your parents may be in this world or not in this world, but their approval is still important. They gave you your name and they wondered about your future. I am not just talking about your accomplishments, I am talking about your core values. Your life is moving along. I have to ask this question. **Are your parents still proud of you?** That leads us to another interesting question.

Are you proud of yourself? It is my experience that most people are not proud of themselves. The truth be told, most people don't even like themselves. Most feel bad about themselves. The reason is, they have bought into the world's understanding of success. They don't like themselves because they are not rich. Instead, they have a pile of unpaid bills. They don't like themselves because they are not popular. They don't like themselves because their lives are filled with uncontrollable problems. You are not the only one. It is a difficult question, are you proud of yourself? Can I give you some pastoral advice? If you don't like something about yourself, then do all in your power to change it. Self-pity won't change a thing.

If you don't like your size, then go for a walk, eat a salad and exercise.

If you don't like your financial state, then stop writing your name on the line, or sell that thing that is dragging you down. You may want to get a job or get a new job.

If you don't like the state of all the relationships in your life, then try to fix it. Pick up your cell phone and call your brother you have not spoken to in twenty years. Make him responsible for the broken relationship.

If you are haunted by some addiction in your life, then do the responsible thing and get some professional help. Stop drinking and join AA.

If you don't like that void in your life, then do all you can to fill it. Go back to school, or help someone in need. I know that these are simple answers to complex situations, but my point is to do something. How many people do you know who are consumed with self-pity? Joyce Meyer once said, *"I used to have a problem with self-pity. Every time the Devil would throw a pity party, I would attend."* Explore all the options and do all you can. It is a difficult question: Are you proud of yourself?

This is the hardest question with eternal consequences: **Is God proud of you?** The issue is not God's love; God does love you. The issue is God's pride. The things the world values are not the things that God values. Never forget it. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ! That means the only thing that really matters to God is Jesus's influence on your life. God does not care about your portfolio. God can be proud of both the rich and the poor. God does not care about your social standing. To God, you can be the life of the party or a wallflower. He doesn't care about your 50,000 friends on Facebook. The only thing that matters to God is Jesus. God must have been proud of John, because no one influenced his life more than Jesus. How much has Jesus influenced your life? Is Jesus influencing the way you spend your time? Is Jesus influencing the way you spend your money? Is Jesus influencing your opinions and attitudes? Is God proud of you? When the crowd learned John's name they asked the question, what will he become? This is my question for you: what have you become? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

In 1827, Eliza McCardle married the local tailor. She was sixteen and he was twenty. She saw great potential in him. It was hard for others to see. He had never been to school, so he could not read or write. She taught him to read, write, and spell. Those days were difficult, but he proved to be a fast learner. He rode that education to national prominence. In 1864, he ran with Abraham Lincoln and became the Vice-President. A year later, he would become our seventeenth President, Andrew Johnson. It all happened because his wife saw some potential in him. What potential is still inside of you?

Will you pray with me?