

December 9, 2018

“UNEXPECTED: Unbelievable”

Luke 1:26-56

I know not everyone here at FPC would say “I believe . . . in this Jesus-specific Gospel.” And, if that’s you, we are so glad you’re here: listening and speaking honestly – with others, with yourself, and with God. That’s way better than pretending you believe. I say this because I’m going to ask questions in the context of already having faith in Christ. But I want to encourage those of you who do not have faith at this point to substitute your own belief scenario. Everyone believes in something or someone.

So here are the questions: When has it been hard for you to believe? More to the point, **when has it been hard to keep believing** what you previously believed with conviction?

Ideally, we’re passing on faith in the Good News about Jesus to our kids at a young age (in age appropriate ways), and then they come to a place as older children or young adults when they make faith in Christ personal; when they own it. We have several examples of this scenario in the young people scattered around FPC; and a similar journey may resonate with many of you. So let’s start thinking about this question [above] from the perspective of a young person who already has faith – someone who is about Mary’s age (13-15 years old). When might it become hard for such a teenager – with faith in Christ – to keep believing/believe more deeply?

A freshman in high school meets a few new friends who aren’t followers of Jesus, but they have a lot in common and start hanging out more and more. They aren’t a bad influence on him, but they aren’t buying the Christmas story that God was born in a barn. One of them isn’t even familiar with the birth of Jesus; she’s never actually heard the story before. So they’re all talking about what their families do on Christmas Eve, and our almost 15 year old says, “We always go to church together and light candles and sing Silent Night followed by Joy to the World.” And one of his friends says, “You don’t actually believe that stuff about a virgin birth and angels, do you? Suddenly, it becomes harder to believe.

An 18-year-old leaves home for the college of her dreams. She not only got accepted; she’s in the honors college. She’s loved her church family and can point to a handful of moments over the last 6 years in which she felt God’s presence in a powerful way. She’s also felt a deep sense of belonging with her church family and has numerous adults and friends who have been a great encouragement to her over the years. But when she moves into the dorms, she discovers her roommate is an agnostic. When she puts her Bible and favorite devotionals on her as yet unused bookshelf, she hears a groan of disapproval behind her. Over the first few weeks of the semester, accusations and questions come in rapid-fire succession. “Christianity is so exclusive.” “How

can you read the Old Testament? It's so violent." "Other world religions are equally true." "Did you know that some of the stuff in the Bible is pure myth?" And somewhere in the middle of her first semester, she begins to question: What do I believe?

Or maybe a person comes to faith in college – through a campus ministry; or they meet a believer at work who leads them to Christ. But parents are hostile (or indifferent) to the Christian faith, and they get immediate pushback. Or the Church and its leaders fail, disappoint, and are a general turn-off – leaving someone in their late 20's (or any age) disillusioned and questioning whether they can trust anything anymore. Or a middle-aged couple watches their marriage crumble; or prayers for the healing of a loved one seem to go unanswered; or the world seems to be getting worse not better; or the latest book on the New York Times best-seller list pokes holes in the Bible. And suddenly we find ourselves asking: Do I really believe? Can I really believe?

Luke locates Gabriel's announcement to Mary in the 6th month of Elizabeth's Unexpected and Unbelievable pregnancy. Just like Zechariah, the appearing of an angel isn't a warm and fuzzy moment for Mary. It's pretty terrifying. Just like Zechariah, Mary is told she doesn't need to be afraid, and then hears something out of left field. "You're going to have a baby boy!" If anyone ever had a reason NOT to believe, it would be Mary. Zechariah and Elizabeth may have been Unable to have kids because of their age, but she's got an even more obvious reason to question the possibility of a pregnancy. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34)

Gabriel gives her the specifics: Holy Spirit, power of God, holy child, Son of God. But he also tells her about her relative Elizabeth, including how long she's been pregnant. And then the angel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible for God." (Luke 1:37) I'm guessing the detail about Elizabeth and her Impossible, Unbelievable pregnancy is initially more helpful than the biological and theological explanation about the Holy Spirit and the Son of God stuff. Here's the first lesson: in the moment, the presence of a good friend is more helpful than a Bible study, says the pastor who has led a lot of Bible studies.

And that is why "Mary set out and went with haste . . ." (Luke 1:39) She booked out of there. "I've got to check out Elizabeth. If what the angel said is true about someone UNABLE to get pregnant, then maybe what he told me will happen!

And then everything happens quickly. Mary gets to Elizabeth's house and calls out her name. Little John kicks inside her, the HOLY SPIRIT reveals truth, and Elizabeth announces the first Advent to someone other than her very excited and quiet husband. Now three people are in on the truth about Messiah's Advent.

Before we decide this is all a bit dramatic and Unlikely – that she would have felt a kick and put two-and-two together like this – let’s remember that Elizabeth (and Zechariah) are the poster children for Advent preparation. They are doing much more than opening Advent calendars, and reading Walter Wangerin. And they don’t spend any time at the mall either. They have been anticipating the Arrival of Messiah for over 6 months now. In their silence and seclusion their senses are on high alert, their spiritual gaze is laser-focused, and they are ready for whatever and whoever God sends their way. And not only do they believe the Unbelievable, but they help Mary believe more deeply than she did after the angel Gabriel left. This Unwed mother, facing an Unplanned pregnancy isn’t alone during the first three months Messiah grows inside her. And that seems to make all the difference in the world.

In this part of the Christmas Story, we discover the power of another person to help us believe the Unbelievable.

God can do anything He wants to communicate and carry out His plan; angels, dreams, miracles, His Holy Spirit, and His Holy Word. But God most often does His life-changing work through actual people He brings into our lives. As a teenager who has no doubt had faith in the God of Israel, Mary’s belief is strengthened, not diminished, by her new roommate – who is anything but agnostic. It doesn’t hurt that they have a LOT in common – miraculous pregnancies at the top of the list. Let’s just say they “get” each other. And because of that, God helps them “get” the larger story of what He is about to do.

Walter Wangerin makes this observation: “Elizabeth is peering in a mirror, for here is someone who knows what she knows. She’s peering in a rich, three-dimensional mirror, for here is the body of one who’s experiencing what she is experiencing. And the mirror she peers in, why, it is also a window! For it opens up on a wonderful vista, broader than two women and two pregnancies put together!” (*Preparing for Jesus*, p.74) These two women believe. They have faith, no doubt. But their faith increases exponentially during their three months together.

I cannot tell you how many times God has connected me with just the right person at just the right time, to deepen my belief in God’s faithfulness. How about you? When things have felt impossible, or at least really difficult, people have been God’s most consistent source of renewal, healing, and encouragement, strengthening my conviction in the power of the Gospel to save and change lives – including my own.

There was sister Mary Ellen, the chaplain at the local hospital who ran support groups for families that lost children – from miscarriage to SIDS. After we lost a little girl born prematurely, and I had convinced myself that Shelly and I were fine and had plenty of support from our church, she watched me break down in our pastors group – all men except for this wise Catholic nun – after returning from an emergency pastoral call to a couple who had just lost a

child to SIDS. She lovingly let me know she would put Shelly and me back on the mailing list, and we started showing up to a wonderful circle of people who we knew “got” our situation.

There was the counselor in our congregation who gave me a recommendation for a therapist at the end of my sabbatical in 2015. First of all, he wanted to hear more about my journey, what I had discovered and experienced during the sabbatical, and what I felt I needed next. Then he told me he’d pray and get back to me. I got other names as well, but within 15 minutes of sitting with the one he recommended, I knew that I was sitting in front of the very best person for me.

There was the wonderful commitment of Karen Jensen to Emotionally Healthy Spirituality mixed with the newsletter from First United Methodist – which I never read – that advertised EHS last January. I’d only met Pastor Steve once or twice, but he was gracious to let me and others participate, giving us a momentum I could not provide on my own.

There was the lunch less than two weeks ago with John Jessup at which I was planning to catch him up on many of our leadership and church undertakings since he had finished his coaching with some of our staff at the end of 2017. Shelly and I were facing some of our first significant challenges as foster parents, and I had completely forgotten that much of John’s professional career before he began working in churches centered around foster care and group homes for teenagers. We didn’t get to church talk for quite some time. I went away so encouraged.

I could go on and on, but you have stories that need to be told as well.

Who has God connected you with, SO THAT your faith deepened, was bolstered, even flourished? Who was it in your past? Is there anyone right now?

Who might it be in the future?

Do you and I dare pray for such a person?

And have you ever thought that some young person out there, maybe even a relative, desperately needs you?

Might you be the person who helps someone else believe the Unbelievable?

Do you dare pray that, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you, God would do something through you that is completely Unexpected in someone else’s life?

Is it possible that you and I can help someone trust God for the impossible?

Because of Elizabeth, Mary’s belief grows into a song, and she sings it out. But it’s not just Mary that has a song to sing. You do too. And so do I. Some of you don’t believe this, or have stopped believing such things. This Advent, we need each other’s presence and friendship and encouragement to believe that the Word who was in the beginning still has a word for us. We need each other to get the words out, and the notes just right.