

"FACES AT THE MANGER (#1): ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH"

(Luke 1:5-15a)

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**[PROPS NEEDED: (1) "Slideshow of faces"; (2) Christmas Story video clip; (3) Chrismon ornaments]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 12-1-24]

--I--

1. **[START SLIDE SHOW OF FACES ON MEDIA SCREEN...]** What's in a face...?

A--At any given moment, they can convey who we are, communicate the cares, concerns, and hope we carry, & even reveal something of the perspective we have towards life.

B--They can convey joy, contentment, distress, sorrow, contempt, sincerity, and can even be used to *cover up* who we *really* are and *mask* what we're *really* feeling.

C--But however they're used, no two are ever alike -- each face is different and unique, and can tell much about us in life. **[END SLIDE SHOW]**

2. Well, the faces that surrounded the manger on that very first Christmas Eve were in many ways no different than our own.

A--They had cares and concerns and hopes, too. And in those faces, I believe we learn not only something about the people to whom they belonged back then, but also something about *ourselves* today.

B--That's why, over the next four weeks (during the Christian season of Advent and through Christmas itself), we're going to be sharing in a series called "Faces At The Manger" exploring the faces that surrounded Jesus at his birth, & what the people to whom they belonged might teach us about life and our relationship with God today. <sup>1</sup>

--II--

3. To introduce *today's* theme, let me invite us to watch a short clip from the popular holiday movie A Christmas Story. **[SHOW VIDEO CLIP... (1:19:20-1:19:53)]**

A--"*There's always next year...*" To most kids, those are some of the most *devastating* words that could possibly be heard at Christmas.

1--In this example, the *one* thing that little Ralphie wanted more than anything else under the Christmas tree was the *one* thing he didn't find: a "Red-Ryder BB Gun"

2--Of course, if you've seen the movie, you know that in the end Ralphie does, indeed, get the gift he's been wanting, but it doesn't come without him first feeling somehow let down by Christmas.

B--My guess is that most of us in this room (including myself, for sure) have had these same feelings at one time or another about a Christmas gift we wanted to receive.

C--But the truth of the matter is that as we've gotten older, many of us have experienced similar feelings in coping with the disappointments/discouragements that have come with more "grown up" dreams and desires which have either gone unfulfilled or been broken, or with people and situations that have seemed impossible to overcome.

4. Well, that's essentially also the story of two "faces" who are introduced in today's scripture from Luke 1:5-15. Listen to their story...

*5 During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. 6 They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. 7 They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. 8 One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. 9 Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. 10 All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. 11 An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. 13 The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth."*

5. Here, of course, we find the story of **ZECHARIAH and ELIZABETH...** two elderly people who (granted) were not *physically* at the manger that first Christmas Eve, but who I believe nevertheless *were* very much in the heart and mind of Mary that night.

A--Despite the fact that they were an upright couple who followed God and tried to live a righteous life, Verse 7 tells us that "*they had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old.*"

1--I'm sure they'd prayed fervently for many years for children of their own.

2--But for whatever reason, God had not answered their prayers -- like Ralphie, what was probably a life's dream for both of them had gone unfulfilled, with Elizabeth's "barrenness" a seemingly impossible obstacle to be overcome.

B--But as we heard, Zechariah (a Priest in Jerusalem Temple) is visited by an angel who tells him that Elizabeth *will* bear a son who'll prepare the people for the Messiah.

1--And what we *didn't read* of the story goes on to say that Zechariah is struck mute by the angel for a time because he doesn't believe it.

2--In the meantime, though, Elizabeth *does* become pregnant, and is visited by her niece, a young maid named Mary, who ponders and sings of the wonder of a God for whom (as another angel said to her) "*Nothing is impossible.*"

C--In the months to come, Elizabeth does, indeed, bear a son and names him "*John.*"

1--And when Zechariah confirms the name, his muteness is released and that son grows up to become the prophet we now know as "John the Baptist."

2--Mary, of course, goes on to her own fame: traveling with her husband Joseph to the small town of Bethlehem, where -- fresh with the memory of *Elizabeth's* miracle in her mind -- she bears *God's* son and names him Jesus.

--III--

6. Again, while the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is not a "Christmas story," strictly speaking, it nevertheless focuses us on the very *heart* of Christmas.

A--For you see, from this story Zechariah and Elizabeth, I believe we learn an important lesson about HOPE in the face of heartache, brokenness, and "unfulfilled dreams," ...

B--...AND of the great value of trusting God through what appears to be "impossible situations" and circumstances. <sup>2</sup>

C--You see, this is a story first and foremost about the HOPE that Christmas brings to the "broken, unfulfilled dreams" and "impossible situations" of our lives.

7. Let me ask today:...

A--What "**BROKEN, UNFULFILLED DREAMS**" ("heartaches," if you will) have *you* had to face or deal with in your life (or are you maybe facing even now)?

1--Is it a relationship that just didn't turn out like you wanted (or needed)?

2--Is it a child you weren't able to have, or who you lost?

3--Is it a career or position you realize you'll never be able to attain in this life?

4--Is it disillusionment with today's state of affairs in our world, nation, and/or community?

5--Is it a loss of innocence or trust in your marriage, or with a family member, or with someone else? (any marriage that's faced an affair has dealt with this)

6--Is it things you wish you'd said to or done with a loved one who's now gone on to be with the Lord?

B--Or perhaps it's not an "broken/unfulfilled dream" that you're facing today, but instead is some kind of **"IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION"**:

1--Maybe it's financial debt you feel you'll never get out from under.

2--...Or an addiction or bad habit you think you'll never be rid of -- you've tried and tried, but it just seems "impossible" to break free from.

3--Maybe, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, you've tried to have kids, but for some reason have been unsuccessful -- you've prayed and prayed, but the doctors have told you that it's just "impossible."

4--Or maybe you just feel overwhelmed by life in general -- kind of like the soldier during the American Civil War who, in the heat of battle, was told to go to the rear by his commander, but who came back after a few minutes and cried out, "*Sir, this fight ain't got no rear!*"

8. Well, whatever these things may be in your life or mine, today's story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reminds us that God is in the business of bringing HOPE to people right in the *midst* of our **"broken/unfulfilled dreams"** and **"impossible situations."**

A--My wife Trish have never grieved the loss of a a child like some of you have. Yet, we do have a wonderful daughter (Jennifer) that we love very dearly, we also always wanted more than one child -- I especially wanted a son.

B--For medical reasons, though, we couldn't have more, so we grieved the children we couldn't have.

C--However, today we are blessed not only with a wonderful, Godly daughter and two beautiful granddaughters (Hannah and Hayleigh), but also a son-in-law (Zach) who is like the son that we never had -- and we're so happy he's part of our family!

D--God, you see, has a way of answering our prayers often in ways that we don't expect!

--IV--

9. So as we wrap up, I want to invite each of us to experience God's hope in a special way...

A--In the front of the Sanctuary is not a *Christmas* tree but our annual *Chrismon* tree - a reference to the "Christ-monogram" ornaments that we use to decorate it.

B--After I pray, for those of you *in the Sanctuary*, I want to invite you to come forward, pick up an ornament or two and then to go hang it/them on the tree as a tangible expression of God's hope and presence in and for the "*Broken/Unfulfilled Dreams*" and "*Impossible Situations*" of your life.

C--For those of you *worshipping online*, as you decorate around your home this holiday, I'd like to invite you to *designate* an ornament or decoration as a symbol of this same hope and presence of God -- it could be an angel, a star, a baby Jesus figurine, or something else. And every time you see or use it, let it remind you of the hope and presence of God you have in the midst of *your* life situation.

D--Whatever these are for you today, it's an opportunity for us to offer our situations and circumstances to the *Lord*, so that HE can offer us HIS hope.

10. [PRAY]

11. [CONGREGATION COMES FORWARD TO DECORATE CHRISMON TREE as sign of hope as contemplative background music plays]

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> This series was inspired by a book of the same title by Barrie Shepherd.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth's pregnancy was a sign of hope that with God *all* things are possible. And her son John "the Baptist" himself brought hope to a hopeless world by proclaiming that a Savior (Jesus) was on the way! (Read about his ministry in Luke 3:1-20).