

December 23, 2007
 Acts 10:34-43 / Luke 1:39-80
 The Messenger, Method and Message of Salvation

If there's one thing we've seen repeatedly, before we even move out of the first chapter of Luke, it is the truth, that when God chooses to move in a saving way, He does so by using people, and their words, and their actions to bring about His saving purposes in the lives of others.

God doesn't just use Jesus. And there's no mystical, super-spiritual, Gnostic, bypassing of the natural processes of birth and life and faith and obedience and seeing and speaking and being. But rather, He uses each one, and incorporates all of them into His saving plan — employing both angels and people / men and women / adults and infants and even a 6 month old fetus leaping for joy in his mother's womb! He uses their feelings, words, actions, movements, prayers, faith, and obedience!

That's the **FIRST** and most amazing thing about the story of redemption. God chooses to bring about a very glorious and other-worldly salvation, by using very ordinary, flawed, imperfect, regular people like Zechariah, Elisabeth, Mary, you and me.

As you read the story you can't help but sense their awe and elation at realizing they had a part in bringing God's salvation to the world — that God was using them to play a part in carrying out such an awesomely exalted task?! Who wouldn't be humbled and amazed and respond like Mary in verse 49, saying in awed wonder: "The Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is His name."

You can almost hear it coming out between every line: "I can't believe God chose to use me."

Yet you know what? You could say the same thing. Because if you are a believer, you have also been chosen to play a part in carrying out God's plan of redemption. God still enlists and uses regular people today, because the plan of redemption is still being carried out today!

The Book of Acts, as my NT professor used to say, which chronicles the history of the church and the spread of the Gospel throughout the world, never really ends! It's a book that will only be completed when Christ comes again, to use us into the eternal state!

Until then, contrary to one radio preacher, God will continue bringing people to salvation, and He will do it by using ordinary everyday people like you and me — calling us and enlisting us and using us — our words and faith and actions and testimony and love and service and obedience to bring people to faith. He doesn't bypass people, but rather, He calls, graces, equips and empowers them and then makes them effective to the saving of others through the assisting influences of His Holy Spirit.

That's what we *have seen*, and *continue to see* in our text for this morning. Starting in v. 39, Elizabeth and Mary (and even the yet to be born fetus of John) seem to experience a kind of private personal Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit falls upon all of them and fills all of them, and they all sense it deeply! (Even the fetus, we are told, leaps with joy at the experience!)

As the angel had predicted concerning John, that he would be *"filled with the Holy Spirit from birth"* (1:15). And it appears that that filling takes place the moment Mary enters Zechariah's house and greets Elizabeth. *"When the sound of your greeting reached my ears,"* says Elizabeth, *"the baby in my womb* (who would have been a fetus 6 months old, about nine inches long and weighing about 1½ pounds) *leaped for joy!"*

That is, the fetus, along with its mother, both sensed and responded with emotional joy and delight to the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit!

But it's not just Elizabeth and the fetus in her womb that are touched and filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit also falls upon Mary too and she also, like her aunt, Elizabeth, senses the joy and elation of being called and filled and equipped and used by the Holy Spirit!

And so, as soon as Elizabeth finishes her prophecy, Mary opens her lips and out flows an inspired, prophetic, utterance of praise and gratitude, where she recounts the ongoing faithfulness and mercy God has shown, and will continue to show, to her and Israel.

But that's not all. Mary's prophecy is not simply a prophecy! It's also a testimony, or description of faith, which when added to what's been said previously, gives us all the necessary elements of true biblical faith.

Back in verse 31 Mary was told she would have a child. But knowing she's a virgin, she struggles to understand how this can be possible? Young as she was, she still knew it was impossible for a virgin to have a child! She wasn't some naïve, illiterate backwoods hillbilly! She knew what it

took to have babies! So she asks, *"How?"* And the angel tells her: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..."* Or in other words, God will bring it about miraculously. To which she responds, *"I am the Lord's servant, may it be unto me just as you have said."*

Which tells us what? Which tells us that faith requires some tangible object or information to rest upon. God doesn't just ask Mary to believe, He gives her something upon which to ground her faith! She is to place her faith in His power! The power of the Most High (as the angel says) — the Almighty One for whom NOTHING is impossible!

Biblical faith is not simply naïve, uninformed, positive thinking. It is belief or trust in the power and promises of God. Throughout history God has done miraculous things. He has shown Himself mighty over and over again. And with that knowledge and information as the ground for faith, He asks us to believe He can do whatever He says He will do. It's not merely "Believe!" It is "Believe, because I have shown myself able to do all I say I will do." It is belief grounded in knowledge and facts!

Yet at the same time, faith is MORE than mere belief in facts. Millions upon millions of people down through the ages have given assent to or claimed to believe the "facts" stated in the Apostle's Creed, without ever really having or exercising what I will call biblical or "saving faith."

Saving faith requires MORE than mere assent to knowledge or facts! It is more than a mere intellectual affirmation of God, providential events, or divine ability. It begins with those things, but as we've seen, it moves beyond them to add the element of trust, and some type of response or commitment or change of lifestyle or priorities. If faith is to be saving faith it must lead to commitment, repentance, obedience, or change that reflects some degree of conformity to what the person claims to believe!

For instance: Say that on a certain given Sunday I invite a man from a local circus to come in with a 50 pound bow, and a bunch of arrows, and with him a cohort who stands at the back of the church with an apple on his or her head! And as the man stands here by the pulpit, with his cohort back there, he asks you, *"Do you think I can hit that apple?"*

And some of you, figuring a volunteer wouldn't come with him unless that volunteer knew he could do it (!) might say, "Yes, I believe you can. You wouldn't have come if you couldn't!"

You voice belief based on some degree of data or facts. So he pulls back the string, and lets the arrow fly, and foosh, it slices the apple in two without touching a hair on the cohorts head!

So he asks you again, ***“Do you think I could do it again?”*** And having seen him do it once, more of you yell, “Yes, you did it once, we believe you could do it again!” (“Giving intellectual assent” to the “fact” that you believe he could do it.)

But then he asks a question that separates belief based on facts from trust that leads to action and calls forth a commitment to adjust one’s life and behaviors accordingly. ***He asks everyone who said they believed to walk over, take the apple, put it on their head, stand against the wall while he takes aim and shoots it off the top of your head!***

Because, you see, “belief” that is not willing to “step up” or make a commitment to do something in relation to that belief, is not really true belief (or the type of belief the Bible asks for or accepts as saving faith).

“Faith” that we are unwilling to act upon is little more than “wishful thinking” masquerading as faith. It would be what James calls “dead faith” because it does not produce action, commitment or change.

And in terms of those called to be MESSENGERS, that’s the point I need to make. Faith that does not exhibit an earnest trust that ventures to step out (even in a hesitating way) and act in accordance with what it claims to believe, is not true biblical or saving faith.

That’s what Jesus meant when he said to some who followed Him, ***“Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” yet do not do what I say?”*** In other words, you are saying you believe I’m Lord, and you even call me Lord, but in your life you don’t act like you believe I’m Lord?

That’s how we know Mary’s faith was real and went beyond mere intellectual assent to facts! For she clearly goes on to entrust herself to God, adjust her life accordingly, and commit herself to being used as a vessel and messenger to bring about God’s saving purposes for mankind.

Profession of faith without some tangible proof of faith makes people question if we really do believe what we say we believe. It’s only when they see us making adjustments that cost us something that they are willing to concede that we really believe what we say we believe.

I'll never forget reading the story of a pastor jailed for his faith by the communists and put in a Russian labor camp. For months he was beaten and tortured to get him to renounce his faith, but he wouldn't.

So one day, out of frustration, one of the guards held a gun to his head and threatened to pull the trigger if he didn't renounce Jesus! To which he responded with calm resolve that he would rather die than deny His Lord. The guard then broke down, and with tearful sobs said, "*I want what you have.*"

Because the pastor was willing to die for what he believed, the guard knew he believed what he said he believed. It's easy for a person to say they believe when that confession costs them nothing! Which is why a willingness to suffer loss or endure suffering has such an effect on people.

The same was true to a lesser degree in a conversation I had with one of Nancy's uncles. Her grandfather Azor Kay (who was not a wealthy man, and by the way, led my mother to Christ!) gave 10% of his income to the Lord's work. And that may not seem so amazing, but in New England that is not common! Generosity is NOT a New England trait!

So, interestingly enough, when I was sharing about the faith with Nancy's uncle, who is wealthy, and an unbeliever, he said the one thing that impressed him about Nancy's grandfather (who was the only Gospel believing person in Nancy's family that we know of) was the fact that little as he had, he always gave 10% of his income to the Lord's work.

Unbelievers are like that. *They measure true faith by the effect it has on one's lifestyle.* By whether or not people are willing to change, alter their habits, give up some sin, sacrifice some pleasure, or risk their lives for what they believe. Because if they're not, chances are they won't be convinced we really believe what we claim to believe.

Like the man with the arrows, people sit in churches every Sunday saying they believe, but when it comes to standing there and letting him put the apple on their head, they back down, thereby exposing their unbelief. **(And believe me, unbelievers can recognize unbelief!)**

So what is God looking for? MESSENGERS who have real faith. Not perfect people — and not even people of perfect faith, but people who are willing to trust God and step out in faith despite their initial doubts — like Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary. People willing to start out on the journey of faith even though, like them, you don't know how it will all turn out in the end.

And that's the hard part, isn't it? God asks us to step out in faith and trust Him and obey Him and adjust our lives accordingly, without giving us a detailed blueprint of how that will look 5, 10, 15 years down the road. And for most people that's scary. It involves too many unknowns. It means living with some certainties while we venture into a future filled with unknowns.

Yet that's the way God intended the life of faith to be — He intended it to be an adventure! Not always safe or familiar, but always interesting! In fact, the more you learn to trust God (and it is a learning process)... the more you step out in faith and heed his call and do what He says, the more interesting and adventurous and fun life becomes!

God doesn't ask us to play it safe! He doesn't call us to a life of routine and boredom! He calls us to a life of faith and risk and sacrifice and adventure! He calls us to grasp the vision and get on board, and trust Him to empower us to save souls and change the world. He sends us *"into all the world, to make disciples of all nations..."* He tells us to "Go," and then simply says *"and I will be with you always even to the end of the age."*

Which is not what we want to hear! *We want God to tell us where to go, and how we'll get there, and who will support us while we're there, and how it will turn out for us in the end!*

But that's not what He does, because the issue is faith! The issue is simply "go in faith!" Be adventurous and go! In your everyday travels, simply go, and as you go trust Me to bring across your path the people I want you to help and speak to and minister to!

Too often we focus on the **PLACE** we're supposed to serve instead of the **TASK** we're supposed to be doing, and thus we often miss out on all the opportunities and people God sends across our path every day — at home, in the workplace, the school, the supermarket, the library, and so forth.

Faith is more focused on doing the **task** at hand, than all the unknown details involved with the task — details we must simply trust God to work out in His way and in His perfect timing as we live the life of faith, trust, risk and adventure! That's a picture of the MESSENGERS God calls into His service — a prototype of the people He wants us to be!

Which brings us to the **SECOND** point — the **METHOD**. And here I must say that the older I get, the more leery I am of packaged programs, or methods that are guaranteed to work everywhere with anyone. I don't find any universally used, uniform, guaranteed METHOD of outreach in these verses or the entire Bible—one to be used every time, in every place, on every occasion, for every culture and every group of people.

In fact, what I see is just the opposite: I see people being creative, and adapting and changing their methods as the situation or circumstances demand it. I see people stumbling into a situation they weren't prepared for and coming up with creative responses on the spur of the moment!

I see them being in situations they never dreamed of and turning those situations into witnessing opportunities as the Holy Spirit guided them on what to say, and what to do, as the situation was unfolding!

On one occasion **PAUL** witnesses by performing an exorcism, on another it's by surviving a poisonous snake bite, and on another it was by getting thrown into jail, singing songs to God in his jail cell, and then after an earthquake occurs, and the prisoners get out of their cells, and the guard is outnumbered and fears for his life, he begs Paul to tell him what he must do to be saved!

I mean you can't plan for such things!

On one occasion **STEPHEN** witnesses by overseeing the distribution of food to poor elderly widows and on another occasion it's by being gracious and forgiving to the people who are stoning him to death!

One time **PHILIP** witnesses by preaching and doing miracles in the streets of Samaritan towns, and another time he goes down to the desert, sees one individual reading his Bible in His car (or chariot!), asks if he can climb in and explain the passage to him, and ends up baptizing the man minutes later in some nearby oasis!

That's why I can say, there doesn't seem to be any set, uniform, METHOD of evangelism prescribed in the Bible! It just isn't there! What it shows instead are people stepping out in faith, not knowing exactly what's going to happen, but trusting God to give them the wisdom to know what to do at the time!

Which means that we also need faith in relation to our methods of outreach. Because outreach is an **adventure full of unknowns** that necessitate trust and spontaneity and creativity and relational, cultural or situational sensitivity! I can never say, "***This is the METHOD that has to be used every time in every situation.***" The Bible itself doesn't allow me to say that!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point — **THE MESSAGE**. We've looked at the Messengers, the Methods, and now the MESSAGE. And here I have to say that unlike the messengers, or our methods, which are always changing, the message does not vary! The Gospel itself remains unchanged and unchangeable — at least in terms of CONTENT.

Yet, having said that it must also be said that the **emphasis** *WILL* change or vary. Because we can never share every aspect of the Gospel on every occasion, we must dole it out in bits and pieces, emphasizing different aspects of the Gospel message at different times depending on how much time we have, where people are at spiritually, what they can handle or how much they can digest.

Yet regardless of which aspect of the Gospel we share at any given time --- there is one overriding theme of the Gospel message that needs to come through each time — the theme of God's mercy, grace and forgiveness.

Notice, if you will, the repeated theme that comes through in both Mary's and Zechariah's discourse. In verse 47 Mary focuses on **God as Savior** (that is, the God whose primary characteristic is that He seeks to save people). He is "God my Savior."

And why is it important to stress that? Because so many people in the world today think of God as one whose primary characteristic is that He judges and punishes rather than saves. On the Day of Judgment that will be the primary focus, for He will come to Judge all people for their sins. Yet the primary message He wants us to share about Him in the present, is that His ultimate desire is to save and not condemn, curse, judge or punish!

And it's not just today. Many of the people of Jesus day thought that the "coming of the Lord" meant an unleashing of all the horrors we tend to associate with the end of the world and that the time of judgment and condemnation had begun — not realizing what we now know, that that scenario wouldn't occur until His Second Coming!

That, I believe, is why **John** clarifies in his Gospel:

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because He has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

It's his way of addressing the misconception that God is a condemning God by assuring them:

God doesn't need to condemn us! We already stand condemned by nature! By our sin we condemn ourselves! And God's purpose, in sending Jesus, is to save us from the condemnation we've brought upon ourselves by our sin! Out of His great love and mercy, He sent Jesus into the world that we might be saved through Him!

And it is true that **on the Day of Judgment** (which is the sure and unavoidable climax of this present age) God will mete out His wrath on each and every unforgiven sin.

But in the present, the Good News of the Gospel is that God in unspeakable kindness and mercy has chosen to hold off His wrath, and extend the offer and dispensation of grace, to give people time to repent and come to a knowledge of the truth.

“The Lord is not slow,” says Peter *“in keeping his promise (that is, His promise to return a second time), as some understand slowness. But rather, He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* (II Pet. 3:9)

“He is the Savior of all people,” says Paul, *“especially those who believe.”* (I Tim. 2:3 and 4:10). And that’s the message He wants us to share: That His desire is to save, not condemn, offering grace and mercy and salvation to all in the present, because the Day of Judgment is an unavoidable reality for all! A day of wrath, that God seeks to save, deliver and rescue you from!

Zechariah says the same thing when speaking of his son John: *“You will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins, because of the tender mercy of our God....”*

You see, regardless of what other aspects of the Gospel you share, THAT must be your overarching theme which you return to again and again! God sent His Son that you might be saved, and the primary aspect of salvation is the forgiveness of your sins and the peace that pervades your soul as a result. (vv. 77 and 79).

That’s the heart and soul of the spiritual life — the knowledge and assurance of salvation that comes by experiencing the forgiveness of your sins and leads to a peace that passes understanding.

PAUL preached that message in Acts 13:38 when he said: *“Therefore, I want you to know, brothers, that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.”*

PETER preached it as well. In his first sermon to the Jews standing there on the Day of Pentecost he concluded by saying: *“Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* And to Cornelius he said the same: *“All the prophets testify about Him (Jesus), that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.”*

And in Col. 2:13 Paul says of all believers: *“When you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ and forgave ALL your sins...”*

That's what He wants all to know! To the unbeliever he says, "You can be forgiven!" And to the believer, "You've already have been forgiven." It doesn't matter what you've done, how many times you've done it, or how selfish or evil or dishonoring to God it was—God promises that if you will believe in Jesus He will forgive ALL your sins.

Not just some, but all! Not just for a while, but forever! Not just the little ones, but even the most vile of all! Sins you would never want others to know you've committed. God knows them all, and He promises to forgive them all. He wants to take away your guilt and shame, giving you a chance to start all over again with a clean slate.

That's God's promise! He promises on oath to save you and forgive you of all your sins, if you will just believe in the Lord Jesus (with a real faith like I was speaking of before)!

Listen to His promise: "Everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of their sins" — every single one of them (Col. 2:13)! **Believe Him and His Promise and be forgiven.**