

## The Christmas Questions

### Why Has This Happened to Me...?

Luke 1:39-45

This is the third Sunday of Advent and we continue to ponder on the Christmas Questions. Previously, we talked about Zechariah's question—a question that most likely was rooted in doubts, "*How can I be sure?*". Contrasting Zechariah, we looked at Mary whose question, "*How can this be?*," was asked with wonder and childlike faith. From the last two Sundays, we can see how the Christmas narrative takes us on a journey from mistrust to conviction, from tragedy to resilience, and from confusion to gratitude.

Today's question is presented to us through the character of Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, who in response to Mary's visit said with great enthusiasm, "*Why Has This Happened to Me...?*". The NIV translation of Elizabeth's question is, *why am I so favored?* Personally, I think that "*Why Has This Happened to Me...?*" is a better translation. However, both versions are expressing very similar meanings and emotions. From the context of the story we know that Elizabeth's question is communicating celebration.

*"Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb and **why has this happened to me**, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" **Luke 1:41-43 NRSV***

Certainly, this episode is one of cheerfulness and joy. Elizabeth is thrilled by Mary's visit. The baby in Elizabeth's womb is excited as well. With lots of admiration and joy, Elizabeth speaks this statement of praise with a loud voice.

However, we know that the question we are contemplating this morning can be used to express the opposite of joy and admiration. *Why Has This Happened to Me...?* is a statement that we use to express confusion and frustration. I wonder if this is the first time Elizabeth said these words.

I not only wonder about Elizabeth's use of this statement before this moment. I also wonder about the meaning she gave to these words, because when we are unfairly judged and rejected, when bad things happen, when we work hard for good results and the outcome is just the opposite, one of the first questions we ask is: *Why is this happening?*

I wonder if Elizabeth asked the question in the past with a different connotation than that of praise. She experienced hardships. She had to deal with infertility and its emotional and social side effects. She had to put up with the cruel and insensitive comments of people who thought that her barrenness was a curse from God.

Elizabeth underwent lots of suffering. I know this because the first words that came out of Elizabeth's mouth after getting pregnant were, "*This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me **and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people***" (Luke

1:25 NRSV). I wonder if Elizabeth asked, “*Why is this happening to me?*”, during those times of disgrace.

Even though the Bible does not explicitly say that Elizabeth asked the question before she got pregnant, we can fill in the blank and imagine she did. And if she asked the question before getting pregnant, most likely she said these words not as an expression of praise but of confusion.

The Bible is clear. Elizabeth and Zechariah, “*Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord*” (Luke 1:6). The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, consistently equated obedience with fertility, productivity, and blessing. The first part of Deuteronomy 28 lists the blessings of obedience. Here is what the Scripture says.

*Now if you really obey the Lord your God’s voice, by carefully keeping all his commandments that I am giving you right now... All these blessings will come upon you... **Your own fertility**, your soil’s produce, and your livestock’s offspring—the young of both cattle and flocks—**will be blessed**.*

**Deuteronomy 28:1, 2, 4 CEB**

Before her pregnancy, Elizabeth’s reality was in contradiction with the Scripture’s worldview. There was an apparent discrepancy between what God promised and what God delivered. It is not hard to imagine Elizabeth asking the question “*Why is this happening to me?*” with much confusion and frustration during difficult days.

Elizabeth’s infertility seemed unjust as she was a righteous person. It is hard not to ask this question when you are doing the right thing for the right reasons and all you get is disappointments and the opposite of blessings. Have you faced contradicting realities? How have you responded? You have probably asked today’s question during those times you have received what clearly opposes your faith, values, and the way you live life. In that sense, we all can identify with Elizabeth.

We could say that Elizabeth had every reason to grow bitter. Yet, we don’t see the text describing Elizabeth in negative terms. Is Luke trying to idealize Elizabeth? Some people would say, “agree.” However, I think Luke is adopting another strategy.

Luke does not want to put emphasis on what is a natural and sometimes the only response of many people. This is: *to dwell in confusion and grow bitter*. I do believe that Luke wants to highlight what is unusual and supernatural. *Elizabeth was able to move past disappointments and do so in a healthy way*.

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 University, and had completed her post-doctoral 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; yet, this same institution was where she was denied tenure. This last fact triggered the whole tragic event.

In the middle of a department meeting she opened fire, killing three and injuring three others. Today, Amy Bishop 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.

We all go through difficult moments. We all have moments of confusion and chaos. The questions for us are these. *Are we able to move past disappointments in a healthy way? How many people do you know that have ruined their lives or are stuck in life because they have not been able to move past some disappointments?*

In the narrative of Jesus' birth, one sees people like Mary, Joseph, and Elizabeth living out a radical faith in God. Of course, all of them had disappointments. Elizabeth had to deal with barrenness. Joseph had to come to terms with Mary's pregnancy knowing the child was not his own. Mary had to deal with the idea of public disgrace. God called these people in unique, challenging contexts, but each of them responded with courage and confidence. They were able to move past their disappointments without growing bitter. These folks demonstrated that it is possible to choose faith over fear, gratitude over despair, and joy over bitterness. This is what I call a supernatural response.

Weathering the storms of life is great, but doing so without growing cynical and resentful is even greater. That's what resilient people do. They spring back from demanding situations to grow as better people, not bitter people. Resilient people!!! That's the kind of people God wants us to be.

Today, we see Elizabeth putting into words the question that most of the times we ask with lots of frustration: *Why Has This Happened to Me?* Elizabeth asked this question with excitement, joy and admiration; it became her song of praise. Luke uses this simple fact to invite his audience, you and I, to become resilient people, the people who travel the unfairness of our falling world choosing gratitude over despair and joy over bitterness.

Being confused when bad things happen is a natural response, but please, don't let it be your **only** response. Life is filled with storms. Are you going to be trampled by them or are you going to weather the storms praising instead of complaining?

Let me share one more thing with you. Elizabeth was in great disgrace before she was able to conceive the baby that was to prepare the way of Lord, John the Baptist. But after she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, her situation drastically changed. That's one of the reasons God breaks into our realities: *to turn our sorrow into joyful dancing...* That's the reason Jesus Christ came into the world: *to lift up the lowly; to fill the hungry with good things, to clothe us with joy.* That's the message of Christmas.

It is my hope and prayer for you to be filled with the joy of the Lord so that you can be strengthened as you go through life's bumpy roads. I pray for you to be filled with the joy of the Lord so that you can grow to be better, not bitter, while you wait for the second coming of Christ.

This is the word of God for the people of God...

Amen.