



December 14, 2016

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dearest family,

On Sunday, I invited you to note over 20 references in only two chapters of the birth narrative, that together pointed to some common conclusions, not least of which was that whatever was going down now, was a long time coming. I certainly wanted you to catch the references to time passing – a lot of it: “*well along in years... a long time ago....*” Yes, there is an underlying theme of promise and “*fulfilled*” is the buzz word of the day, but every quoted source was a long time ago - over 700 years. And the whole narrative begins with Abraham, who received the messianic promise of all nations being blessed, and that was nearly two millennia earlier. And even in the immediate context, that slow and painful passing of time was earthed in the experiences of a waiting Simeon and an aging Anna, whose whole lives had been bound to this wheel of unfulfilled expectation.

You have to engage the challenges of Luke chapter 1, before you revel in the glories of chapter 2. In Luke's account the story begins with Zechariah, as the officiating priest, praying, and in his priestly prayers, he is representing the huge gathering outside that was on their faces. He was asking, yet again, just like his priestly predecessors before him for no less than 400 years, praying for the nation of Israel. He was asking God for mercy and deliverance. He was asking for the Messiah to come and get them out of the terrible mess they were in. Let's be honest. It was a special annual religious occasion but there was absolutely no reason to expect anything unusual that would cause the incense pot to be dropped. After all, national religion had been going through a quiet phase. If God had been dumb for so long, then there was no expectation for him to speak now. But this year, with no warning, as he finished the prayer on behalf of others and his voice was silent, another voice said “Amen!” and no-one else was meant to be in there! Gabriel appeared.

But it was not just about centuries of a nation's asking and waiting. We also know from the context that behind that big prayer for national revival, was a poignant and tender life-long prayer for something else – for a child. If the national issues dominated Zechariah's public prayer, then his wife's barrenness burdened his private supplication. Elizabeth was as childless as God was wordless. What was the use? Like the nation, they had learned to live with no expectation of change. The theology of asking had taken a real beating for a long time. So, which prayer was heard? Which question was answered? Was it the one for the redemption of Israel, or the one for a son. (You'll have a son? I think that Zechariah can be forgiven for not understanding that this angelic announcement brilliantly and sovereignly provided a connection between both prayers, between what he wanted for himself and what God wanted for everyone else. Our own need does not make us conscious of how the answers to our prayers have meaning and necessity for any other number of God's purposes. While we are wanting satisfaction for ourselves alone, God is wanting salvation for everyone, forever. While we are dominated in our asking by the temporal aspects of our situation, God is thinking “eternal”. Through the answers to our asking, He is able to purpose things beyond our wildest dreams, that will not only cram our small crib, but fill the nations with his glory. They just wanted a baby, and God was wanting the messenger prophesied about by Malachi. Elizabeth appeared infertile but it turns out that she was in a gestation process that was 400 years in labor.

Of course, there's plenty of other asking here in the story: Simeon and Anna, persevering, faithful and remaining somehow totally expectant, never succumbing to bitterness as the years rolled by, never allowing the lack of answer and therefore the necessity of continued asking, to stop them fulfilling what God had given them to do and made them to be. Again, despite the realities of aging, their asking seemed to engender more faith and fervor as time slowly passed. Anna is a particularly amazing example as she is off everyone's radar, except God's. This tells me that the lack of an answer does not mean we are not in his view! She was from the lost tribe of Asher, just to add to her lostness, and she was lost to marriage as a widow, lost to men. But there is something in the perseverance of the asking that is in itself purifying and empowering, even in the face of no immediate answers and possible discouragement.

Over the next few days, at our Christmas service next Saturday night, (hint! hint! At 6p.m.!) at services all round the world on Christmas day, there will be a truthful and rightful expression and declaration of joy to the world, in the famous hymn by Handel and Watts. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!" The same joy will be declared in Phillip Doddridge's hymn: "Hark the glad sound! The savior comes!" It would seem that there was absolutely nothing to worry about. True, but this joy was a new experience. The second line of Doddridge's carol gives us a clue: "*the Savior promised long.*" The fact is that as we see in the text, (and we identified at least 20 references on Sunday in two chapters of incarnation narrative) the sounds of celebration had at last replaced the sounds of silence. In the terms of Simon and Garfunkel's defining song, "the words of the prophets" had indeed been "whispered in the sound of silence." Though the immediate expression was glory, for angels and for shepherds, the backdrop was an experience of grief. Though the present activity of the day was worshiping, the customary one had been waiting. Everyone was now saying that everything was fulfilled, but up till now, if you believed a promise you better be patient, and so better be your children, and grand-children and great grand-children. The story began with a genealogy, didn't it?

You can't get around the fact that the birth-story opens after the longest period of unanswered asking that there had ever been – well ever been since the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for, interestingly enough, the same period of 400 years. That text in Exodus says: "*The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out*". And it also says: "*Their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham.*" Remembered? 400 years later? What took you so long? Abraham? Covenant? And didn't a messianic promise come with that? So is now the time at last for that? But this was 1400 years before Zechariah was praying in the temple. The NT birth narrative begins in a context of unanswered prayer. "Hello darkness, my old friend... but my words like silent raindrops fell, and echoed in the wells of silence." Those wells were centuries deep and all messianic hope had drowned in them.

There is no disagreement, either in scripture or in the historic testimony of the church, its teachers, and its congregants that there is much asking that is not answered. But there are divided opinions about how this should be perceived and understood. The truism that there are no unanswered prayers, because the answer is always 'yes, no or maybe' is a facile and unhelpful place to start. No jaunty jingle will serve to provide healing balm or resolution for an unanswered asker who feels caught in the no-man's land between the request and the response. The longer the answer is in coming, the more that space is marked out by emotional and theological barbed wire. Although silence is at first the mark of a good listener, the protracted silence to asking raises some questions: was the phone off the hook, was the phone picked up, was it just a recorded message, was it heard, did it register, will there be a return call, is the line cut?

Thus, on Sunday, I acknowledged the reality of unanswered prayer in our experience, noting that this was the context in which the angelic visitations of the birth narratives engaged. It is not without significance that the first words spoken in Luke's presentation are: "*Your prayers have been answered!*" Clearly, I had time to do no more than identify the problem, and leave you hanging for an answer to the question I posed.

Is it possible to close the gap between our asking and His answering; between our actual speaking and His assumed hearing; between our wanting and the waiting; between what we expect and what we experience; between what we are hoping for and what is actually happening? What bridged that gap between Abraham's childlessness and the Pleiades and Orion? On starry nights was he tempted to stop looking up? It seems that he found a way to keep staring at stars. "*Against all hope Abraham in hope believed.*" (Romans 4:18) Does that settle everything for us? We do not want to accept specious rationalizations as to why our asking is in the pending tray, if in fact it made it even that far. But is it not reasonable to at least ask about some possible explanations for the "gap" that might help close it somewhat? Can we look for some reasons? What reasons would Zechariah have given, if any, to someone who asked him what the point was of him showing up yet again to pray the same prayers after so many centuries of iron skies, and closed doors? What answer would you have given?

Till the second half of the message...

Patiently yours,
Stuart