

Reading from the Gospels: Luke 1:5-20, 39-55

Shut Up and Wait!

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I heard some good gossip this week. I'd like to share it with you, but the person who told me said not to let it go any further. That's the trouble with good gossip. It's that little caveat that seems to come with each juicy tidbit ... the small print in the contract between two people ... "don't tell anyone, but . . ."

Of course, we usually go and tell someone ... what's the fun in keeping something a secret when you can share it with someone else? "Did you hear about Jane and Pete? No ... well, I'm not supposed to say anything, so if I tell you, it stops right here."

"Oh, I promise ... I won't say a word." And, of course, the news begins to spread ... but it's ok, because no one is going to tell anyone else.

I remember a time back in high school when a girl ... I'll call her Wanda to protect her identity ... when Wanda was called to the principal's office in the middle of English class. You don't get called to see Mr. Ellis in the middle of a class unless one of two things has happened ... either someone in the family has died ... or you've done something contrary to the 212-page student manual on conduct. It was usually the latter.

It didn't take long for the rumor mill to go into operation. You see, Wanda was one of those shy and reserved kids who spent a lot of time with her nose in a book or sitting alone in the library. She was a bit of a loner. But now, even people who had never spoken to Wanda seemed to be able to share the most intimate details of her personal life. And to make matters worse ... Wanda left school that day and didn't come back.

That only intensified the reports of her "sordid life." And from what I heard about Wanda ... it's probably a good thing she didn't come back. All this time I thought she was such a nice girl. She had never gotten into trouble before ... at least any that I knew about. I even heard that she attended that small Baptist church on the southern end of the county.

It didn't really make any sense. But who cared ... the stories and her legacy she left behind just grew and grew. Later that year I found out that Wanda, who lived with her mother, had moved away to a new town because her mother had remarried. Of course, the stories that were told about her weren't true. And I always wondered if Wanda had ever heard about those terrible rumors that circulated about her ... I hoped she hadn't.

Anything like that ever happen to you? Maybe you were one of those who helped to share a rumor about someone else ... a bit of juicy gossip ... or maybe, you were the focus of such a rumor. If you've ever been the target of some gossip, than the story you will hear this morning just might touch your heart ... it might stir up some old emotions.

Sometime people can be downright mean. Long before I ever went to high school ... another young girl ... actually probably a little younger than Wanda ... got caught up in the rumor mill. Things were said about her behind her back. Old friends now gave her the eye. I'm pretty sure that even her parents disapproved of her actions.

Listen with both your heart and mind to our reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2 ... I'll be reading from Matthew Peterson's translation, The Message.

5 During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zechariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth.

6 Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God.

7 But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

8 It so happened that as Zechariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment,

9 it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense.

10 The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering.

11 Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense.

12 Zechariah was paralyzed in fear.

13 But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John.

14 You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth.

15 He'll achieve great stature with God.

16 He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God.

17 He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God."

18 Zechariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

19 But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news.

20 But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time." Our reading continues a few months later ...

39 Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country,

40 straight to Zechariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit,

42 and sang out exuberantly, You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, also blessed!

43 And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me?

44 The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.

45 Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!

46 And Mary said, I'm bursting with God-news;

47 I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

48 God took one good look at me, and look what happened—I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

49 the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

50 His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.

51 He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts.

52 He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud.

53 The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.

54 He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

55 It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The year was 1987. Susan and I were going to be heading to her parent's home in Florida for Christmas, so we had my parents over for an early holiday meal before we left.

Candles lighted the room with a soft glow, a prayer was spoken, and a wonderful meal was shared. And then it was time for the dessert. Surely Susan had prepared something fitting for the occasion ... maybe a chocolate roll cake ... or cherry's jubilee ... or even a baked Alaska. No ... not even close.

From the kitchen she brought out four simple bowls of ice cream ... with a pickle laid in each bowl. My parents didn't say anything ... they just looked down at their bowls. I think it was my mother who

caught on first ... I suppose most mothers would ... and the news of Susan's pregnancy was announced. It was a joyful way of ending a meal ... and beginning a new chapter in all of our lives. And later ... in Florida ... the news and the joy was shared all over again on Christmas morning.

There is probably nothing more exciting than sharing the joyful news of a pregnancy ... the joyful expectation of what will come. But unfortunately ... such news wasn't received quite so joyfully in Mary's home village of Nazareth. Only two facts seem to matter to her family ... and to the village people ... Mary is pregnant ... and Mary is not married. There is no joy ... Mary has shamed her family ... she has disgraced herself.

And the gossip mill begins to turn full steam. Can you imagine ... Mary knows the truth ... the truth that the Angel Gabriel told her ... that she would be the mother of the Son of God. But Mary's joy is tempered by the words said about her ... the incriminating stares of the people ... she is left speechless at a time in her life when she should be the most joyful ... when she is dying to share the joy she knows in her heart. But who would believe her?

Not far away ... in a small village in the Judean hill country ... another drama has been unfolding. Mary's first cousin, Elizabeth, is an older woman ... well past child-bearing age. She has been barren all of her life. She is married to a righteous man, Zechariah ... a member of the temple priesthood. He is one of those responsible for entering the holy of holies in the temple and burning the incense offerings to God.

All of his life he has prayed for the Messiah to come to the people of Israel ... but his prayers have gone unanswered ... just as his prayers for the birth of his own son have, too, gone unanswered. Now in the dawn of his life, I doubt he even lifts those prayers any longer. He has come to accept that those events will never happen in his lifetime.

Except ... it seems that God has other ideas. And when God has other ideas, he likes to surprise people. And just like Mary is surprised ... Zechariah gets a shocking visit from an angel. Now put yourself in his shoes ... he's old ... he and Elizabeth have given up any hope of ever having a family ... and an angel of the Lord suddenly pops on the scene, scaring him out of his wits, and proceeds to tell him that Elizabeth is going to bear him a son ... but not just any son ... a son whom he will name John ... a son who will foretell the coming of the Messiah.

By now, ol' Zechariah has got his wits back about him ... so he looks that angel in the eye and tells him ... "OK ... if this is true ... if we're going to have a son ... and if the Messiah is REALLY coming ... then you're going to have to prove it somehow. I've waited a long time ... but let me tell you ... I'm not so sure you can make this happen ... I think you waited a bit too long!"

Angels don't like to be reprimanded. Here's a good piece of pastoral advice to you ... if an angel ever tells you that something is going to happen ... don't question it. Don't put the angel to the test. Because look what happens to poor Zechariah ... the angel shuts his mouth ... and he will be unable to speak until all that has been told to him comes to pass.

Now, I don't want to make fun of Zechariah ... but can you imagine how this plays out at home? How do you explain all this to your wife when you can't speak a single word ... and on top of that ... he's got to convince her that she's going to have his baby? It was probably the greatest game of charades in the annals of history. And that's all I have to say about that!

How ironic is this story ... Mary is silenced by her pregnancy ... unable to express the joy she feels

because of the unwarranted shame placed upon her ... and Zechariah is silenced by an angel ... unable to share the great news in his heart ... even with his wife.

So when Mary travels to visit Elizabeth ... there is finally an explosion of joy. Now Mary has someone she can share her news with ... the news of a Savior for the world ... and she is no longer silent. And out of her mouth comes a beautiful hymn ... a hymn of pure joy. And there ... in that same moment ... as John, growing within Elizabeth's womb ... jumps for joy within her ... Elizabeth, too, now understands as she looks at Mary and then to Zechariah ... and I can just imagine proud papa ... still unable to speak ... pointing at the two mothers and then pointing to the heavens ... the news finally revealed ... the greatest news ever told in the world.

Anticipated joy! Expectant joy! And that joy became a reality ... for in less than a week, we will celebrate the birth of that Savior ... Jesus Christ ... who came into this world to save us from our sins and to give us the hope of eternal salvation.

Yet ... even though this is Advent and Christmas is this coming Thursday ... where is the joy ... the explosion of joy in your heart? Think about it ... does anyone really talk much about that good news anymore? Oh don't get me wrong ... there is plenty of news we like to share these days ... plenty of good juicy gossip ... it's just that the news of a Savior doesn't seem to make it to the top 10 list.

In a world that brags so much about instant communication ... the news of Christmas ... the news of a Savior ... isn't exactly burning up the Internet. I even did a little research this week on what were the hot juicy gossip topics of 2009 on the Internet ... and here's what I found.

At the top of the list is Michael Jackson; his name registers a whopping 107,000,000 Internet sites ... that's a lot! Tiger Woods ... his name came in with 47,200,000 Internet sites, That's also lot. Those were the two big ones. Then you've got plenty of others ... Including Jon and Kate with 3,620,000 sites ... followed closely by the Octomom with 3,570,000. And finally ... way down on the list comes Jesus Christ with 2,840,000 sites ... quite a ways back ... he's closely followed by John Edwards. Poor Sarah Palin only registered 400,000.

There's no doubt about it ... we still like to gossip ... we still like to share stories about Wandas ... and about the unwed Marys of this world ... that kind of news is so much more interesting. But that kind of sharing does absolutely nothing to build the Kingdom of God.

So as we move into this final week of Advent ... I would like for you to dwell upon your call as a disciple ... as one of those fortunate ones who knows the story of our Savior. Unfortunately, not everyone knows the story ... In a store recently, a young mother was asking the clerk if she had one of those Noah Nativity scenes. That's sad.

As one of Christ's disciples ... you're going to have to be willing to make some introductions. So here's what I want you to consider doing in the coming year ... just three very simple things ... First ... put away the *National Enquirer* ... turn off the TV for a little bit ... and spend just a few minutes reading your Bible every day. You can do it in the morning ... or in the evening ... You can even keep a copy in the bathroom. I don't care ... just spend a few minutes each day reading a little scripture.

Turn off the gossip ... and hear again the Good News. That's stuff worth sharing. Then I want you to pray each day. I'm not talking about grace at the table or some big planned family devotion ... not that those aren't important. I'm talking about connecting yourself with your Savior to empower your life ...

to get you hooked in with the one who will lead you and show you where to go and what to do in this world.

Pray that God will use the words you speak each day to build up ... and not tear down. And then, finally ... I want each member and friend of this church ... each person who claims Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior ... to invite at least five people to church in the coming year. That's all ... just invite them ... a friend ... a family member ... a co-worker ... someone you meet on the street ... it really doesn't matter. Just do it.

It's always amazing what happens when we welcome a new visitor into this place ... it's amazing what God's Spirit will do. That's when we can let God go to work ... as the Good News of Jesus Christ is proclaimed here in word, song and prayer ... and the story is heard once again ... the Good News that Mary and Elizabeth and Zechariah once joyfully shared. . . the news of a Savior ... the joyful news that he has come ... and that he will come again ... fills all of our hearts with the expectant hope, peace, love and joy of this wonderful season.

I pray ... with all my heart ... let us be about it. Hear now an Advent prayer by Henri Nouwen ...
Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.

We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.