

The Women of Christmas

Luke 1:5-7, 23, 26-38; 2:36-38

Sunday, December 11, 2011—Orion UMC

Rev. Dave Schultz

Among those things that makes this time of year so very special are Christmas cards. Every December we check our mailbox for cards from friends or family who may live many hundreds of miles away. Either we've moved or they've moved and now both of our families use Christmas cards as a vital part of maintaining our relationship with one another. In some cases, it's been a year since we last communicated with some of those friends, so those Christmas cards become an even more important link for us.

Most of the cards we receive are carefully selected with a beautiful scene on the cover. But what I enjoy the most are the personal messages written inside. Sometimes they may even be accompanied by a family picture.

This morning, I'd like to invite you to take a look at three different Christmas cards with me. We'll be looking over the shoulders of three women to read them; they received the cards first, but I'm certain the message inside will be applicable to us as well as the ones who first tore open the envelope.



The first card is addressed to Elizabeth and is found in Luke 1. Verses 5 through 7 read:

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

The picture on the cover of Elizabeth's Christmas card is not one we would normally associate with Christmas. Rather than proclaiming "Joy to the World," the message on the cover of her card reads, "Devout but Disappointed." Beneath those sad words is a picture of Elizabeth and Zechariah beside an empty crib.

Life was quite bleak for Elizabeth. Because of the social expectations of her day, she lived with a certain level of shame because she was barren. Her youthful hopes for having a big family faded with the passing of every year. Finally, she abandoned her dream altogether.

As 2011 draws to a close, we may pine for missed opportunities and failed goals. We may simply decide, "It's too late," much as Elizabeth had done when she gave up her dream of having a child.

But then we open the card. Beginning at verse 23 we read that after Zechariah served as priest before God and offered incense in the sanctuary of the Lord, his wife Elizabeth conceived and said,

"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."

Elizabeth subsequently gave birth to a child who grew up to be John the Baptist, the one who was to prepare the way of the Lord.

And the message imprinted inside Elizabeth's card?

"It's not too late."

When 2011 unfolded eleven and a half months ago, what did you resolve to accomplish with God's help? Did you keep your resolutions? What were your hopes and dreams last spring when the snow melted? Did you see those hopes and dreams fulfilled? Hear God's message to Elizabeth: "It's not too late." Receive it as God's message to you.



Our second Christmas card is addressed to Mary. It is found in Luke 1 beginning at verse 26:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

Like a black-and-white drawing, the picture on the cover of Mary's Christmas card is a study of contrasts. On the one hand we find the promise of God: "Mary, you are favored of the Lord and you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus for he shall save God's people from their sins."

What a glorious promise! Not only does Mary discover her life has been pleasing to God, but she also learns that God wants to use her for his glory. In contrast, however, to the promise of God is Mary's response. Her reaction is one of doubt and excuses. When she hears the angel tell her that she is to bear a son, Mary says, "How can this be? After all there are certain minimum requirements for having a baby and I have not met those minimum requirements."

How often have we disqualified ourselves from doing the Lord's work? "God, I haven't met the basic minimum requirements for this task. Perhaps you should find somebody better suited for the job." We are so quick to point our inadequacies.

But then we open the card. Beginning at verse 35 we read:

35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

It is precisely because we are inadequate that God wants to use us. When we make ourselves available to God even when we have not met the basic minimum requirements, we become a unique vessel of God, as Mary did. Once Mary as a virgin availed herself to God, there could be no mistaking what was happening in her life and body as anything less than a miracle of God.

That is standard operating procedure for God: the Lord always works through a human vessel, but in such a way that the results are clearly God's handiwork

And the message imprinted inside of Mary's card:

"You're the one."

"You can do it. Don't disqualify yourself from fulfilling God's plan."



The third Christmas card which we will be considering this morning is addressed to Anna. This card arrived after Christmas, though it still arrived at just the right time. The picture on the cover of Anna's card is a portrait of a quiet but certain faithfulness which went unnoticed by almost everyone else who went to temple. But it did not go unnoticed by God. We read about Anna's Christmas card in Luke 2 beginning at verse 22:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, (Mary and Joseph) brought (Jesus) up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."... (verse 36) There was ... a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

This is why Anna dwelt in the temple. She lived in anticipation of seeing the Savior with her own eyes and finally, in the middle of a routine that was some 60 years old, she found something the prophets longed to see.

The message inside of Anna's Christmas card:

"Lift up your eyes"

"Lift up your eyes and see the Lord right in front of you."

"Lift up your eyes and see the fulfillment of God's promises."

"Lift up your eyes and see the fulfillment of your six decades of faithfulness embodied in a single infant."

All of Anna's faithfulness finally paid off. It wasn't too late, even though she was growing old and may have thought her time was past. God was right on time and Anna was privileged to be on of the first evangelists telling others that she had discovered the Messiah.



This morning, picture yourself receiving a Christmas card from God. What's the message imprinted inside? Perhaps God's message to you is the same as God's message to Elizabeth: "It's not too late." Or perhaps God's message to you is the same as Mary's: "You're the one." Or perhaps it's the same message God gave to Anna: "Lift up your eyes." God's Christmas card to you is not intended to be placed in a basket or set on a mantle to be ignored. Rather, let us take to heart the message we find in God's Christmas card.