

The Too Good News?

Micah 5:2-5
Luke 1:39-45

Jordan Baize sat at the baby grand piano in the corner of his great room, playing Bill and Gloria Gaither's worship song, There's Something About That Name. Unbeknownst to him, his sister, Whitney Brown, recorded the moment on her cell phone camera. She walked down the hallway toward the sound, the volume growing louder, and turned a corner to see him sitting at the instrument. He played the chorus as she panned up...to the leaden gray sky. Turning side to side, Mrs. Brown's lens showed bare rafters, missing walls, a reinforcement beam hanging down at a crazy angle right over the piano. Mr. Baize's home and thirteen acres lie near Bremen, Kentucky, in the path of the 200-mile tornado that ripped through the state a week ago, Saturday. Earlier that day, alarmed at the tone of the warnings online and on television, Jordan had contacted his ex-wife and insisted that she, her new husband, the children they'd had together, and his sister and her family come to his place. He had one of the few basements in the area. They spent the next two hours—including the thirty seconds it took the monster twister to pass over them, down below, huddled under a mattress.

Interviewed by Scott Calvert of the Wall Street Journal, Jordan Baize said, "Christian music is just a huge factor in my life. It just brings a sense of peace. And it

helps me recenter and refocus.” He and his sister are surprised the video she took has become the most-watched on YouTube for the week just ended, but recognize maybe it brings people some of that peace. He added that as each day passes the piano gets worse and worse. But he knows he can replace it, which he cannot the lives of his family and himself. Now here is the question that so often arises when we encounter such a story: is it too good to be true? Does this guy really feel this way? Or does he feel that as a Christian he has to testify to the Prince of Peace even when he feels the devastated by a crippling loss?

Only Jordan Baize can answer for himself. Meanwhile, we must answer for ourselves. Is the Good News too good to be true? In the Gospel of Luke today we encounter two women who seem to have accepted surprising news as true and good. Elizabeth, an older, childless woman, had some three months earlier learned she was pregnant. She did not learn it from her husband, Zechariah, unless he was remarkably adept at Charades. As Luke tells it, the angel Gabriel had visited Zechariah while he performed his priestly duties in the Temple. Gabriel foretold the aging couple would conceive. She would bear a son. He would be great in the eyes of the Lord and of the people. Zechariah asked, “How can this be, as my wife is getting on in years?” Angry at the challenge, Gabriel told Zechariah he would not speak again until after the birth of their son.

For her part, once Elizabeth realized she was in fact pregnant, she accepted the news without question—at least as far as Luke knew. He recorded her reaction as

satisfaction that the reproach she had borne among her people would now disappear. For the Jews of that time and place, a married woman unable to produce a son was clearly unworthy before God. Her sins had made her barren. But now Elizabeth rejoiced without reservation. What sins do we commit that make us fear we have disqualified ourselves from receiving the blessings of God? I have heard people testify that their divorces were so messy they felt unclean, and unable to trust in God's grace. Others have said their habit of gossiping, or of having conducted their business affairs in a shady manner made them feel that the biblical story of grace and forgiveness is too good to apply to them.

And all the while, Jordan Baize sat there, playing a praise song to his savior. A divorced man. A man who inherited all their father's property at the expense of his sister and her family. A report credited to the WBKO television news staff tells this story. Sister Whitney Brown said, "He's always doing things like insisting we come to get in his basement. Always thinking about others—even his ex. But he doesn't believe in himself." She went on to describe how their father had been "of the old ways", that he felt the son should inherit all the property. The daughter had married. Now she had a man to protect and to provide for her. Jordan felt guilty about this. She did not feel he needed to. Certainly not after the tornado. As it happened her home, about two miles away, sustained no damage at all. But nobody could have predicted the path of the storm. None of us can predict the patterns of the storms to come our way. All we can do is try to keep our faith intact as we await them.

The word joy appears repeatedly in Luke 1. Elizabeth experienced it when she realized she was expecting. She experienced it again at the birth of her son John. She and husband Zechariah experienced it when he could speak again. Their son John leaped for joy in his mother's womb when he heard Mary greet them. And Mary felt it when that same angel announced her own pregnancy. To be sure, hers was a joy tempered considerably by her vulnerability. Though betrothed to Joseph, she had not yet married. We have spoken in previous years of the twists and turns scholarship has taken in describing the precise nature of their relationship at this point. We have understood for hundreds of years that the word the King James Version translates as "virgin" actually meant "young girl". More accurately, it might signify what we have come to call a "tween", a person between childhood and adolescence.

At such an age Mary could possibly have gotten pregnant in the usual way. But she and Joseph would almost certainly never had had intercourse before this moment. According to the day's Jewish customs, early on their wedding day Joseph's female relatives would have examined her to make certain she remained a virgin. If she were not, his family had the right to call off the wedding. The shame would have blanketed her and her entire family. Her prospects ever to get married would disappear. Whether we like such inequitable, patriarchal expectations of women and not men, the facts are the facts. This is how it was. And now an angel tells this young girl she will become pregnant.

She would become impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Jews then did not often

speak of the spirit of God, let alone specifically of the Holy Spirit. The word the angel used for “Holy Spirit” applied almost always to the brilliant, blinding presence of God behind the screen in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. So we must ask, was the angel’s report news too good, or too bad, for Mary? Could it possibly be true in the first place? What would people think? What would Joseph and his family do? Yet despite the threat to the only future she had ever imagined for herself, she accepted the news calmly and faithfully. Was this, too, too good to be true?

The last words in our passage today come from Elizabeth, looking at her much younger cousin Mary. She said, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Blessed is she who believed. Blessed are those who believe. Blessed are those who believe even as they sit in the ruins of their homes. Blessed are those who believe even as they scramble to find places to worship after their church building got blown away—one of the estimated 125 churches destroyed by last Saturday’s tornadoes. Blessed are those who believe even after divorce, or infertility, or the loss of loved ones and friends to COVID, or whatever affliction has beset them. The central message of our passage from Luke is that God planned the birth of the Savior in accordance with the visions of the prophets of old, prophets like Micah. But we can with complete legitimacy focus instead on the faithful reactions of the women most intimately affected by that plan.

Because sometimes we need to get a faith booster. A person close to us emerged just yesterday from quarantine after contracting the virus. He had gotten his

booster one day before he came into contact with the person he believes infected him. His doctor told him that had he not gotten the booster his symptoms would likely have been so mild he might never have suspected he had the disease. As it was, his body had not had time to process the booster and his immune system probably misinterpreted it as additional virus, creating more inflammation and thus a higher body temperature, than it otherwise would have done. Indeed, his low moment came when for about twelve hours he felt so chilled he could not get warm no matter what he and his wife tried. (He also reported that once he felt more normal he made himself a really strong gin and tonic. It tasted like water. Your preacher does not know what to do with this story beyond just dropping it here.)

Do not wait for close contact with disaster before you seek to boost your faith in a loving, gracious God. It might prove detrimental, not beneficial, to have rolled the dice in that particular way. The Good News is not too good to be true. Ask God's Holy Spirit to strengthen your faith in Jesus. There is something about that name. Mary saw the prospect of her life being taken away and yet she accepted that God had a good reason, a good purpose for the plan. In our youths the plans we make tend to be for education and careers. In young adulthood often we turn to plans for family life. As we age our planning focuses on retirement, money and what our new identity will be once retired. Where is God in all your plans? Where is faith in the goodness of God? Where is trust in the grace of God? My friends, believe the Good News. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We are blessed. We have purpose. We have hope. It's not too good to be true. Trust in the plan.