Knowing God

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 1:67-69

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The first two chapters of Luke’s gospel resemble a musical. One moment, people are talking among themselves and going about their everyday lives. Then, angels appear and, before you know it, everybody breaks into song.

I can’t get the *Sound of Music* out of my head. Maria and Captain von Trapp are having a serious conversation about something. Suddenly, Maria shifts gears and breaks into a stirring rendition of “The hills are alive with the sound of music.”

Like I said, the early chapters of Luke’s gospel resemble a musical. Luke introduces us to three songs or canticles that predominate his first two chapters.

Mary sings the first song. She sings after the angel Gabriel tells her that she will give birth to the Son of the Most High. In Latin, we call her song the *Magnificat* or *magnify* from the first line of the song, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (1:47).

Zechariah sings the second song. This same angel, Gabriel, visits Zechariah with the news that his elderly wife Elizabeth will have a son who will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Zechariah’s song is called *Benedictus* or *blessed* that derives from the opening line in the song “Blessed be the Lord” (1:68).

Simeon sings the third song. This song occurs eight days after Jesus’ birth, at the time when he is dedicated in the
temple. *Nunc Dimittis* is the Latin name of the song after the first line of the song, “Now, dismiss your servant in peace” (2:29).

The Dutch artist Aert de Gelder painted this memorable scene of Simeon’s song. Incidentally, Gelder was a student of Rembrandt. What strikes me about this painting is the red blanket. It serves as a vivid reminder of Christ’s coming sacrifice on the cross.

Today, our focus is on Zechariah’s song. I told you Zechariah’s story two Sundays ago. Zechariah is a priest who wins the temple lottery. His name is chosen for the distinct honor of burning incense in the temple. On the day he performs his sacred ritual in the temple, Gabriel announces that Zechariah and Elizabeth will give birth to a son. They are to call him John.

Zechariah expresses apprehension. He asks for more proof. Show me a sign. “You want a sign? I’ll show you a sign,” is the effect of Gabriel’s words. “You will be unable to speak until further notice.”

Zechariah has nine months to think it over. Nine months to reflect on his encounter with Gabriel. When God restores his voice after John is born, Zechariah breaks forth in a song loaded with Old Testament imagery.
Zechariah’s song divides into two parts. The first part praises God for sending Jesus (1:68-75). Each verb in this first section is present perfect tense. Present perfect refers to something from the past that continues into the present. “He has come to his people Israel to redeem them” (1:68). “He has raised up a horn of salvation in the house of David” (1:69). The image of a horn in the Bible refers to something strong and powerful, as evident in the horns of an animal. “He has saved us from our enemies” (1:71). Enemy can refer either to mortal foes or to unseen demonic forces. “He has remembered his covenant that he promised through our father Abraham” (1:73). “He has enabled us to serve without fear” (1:74). Do not miss this last promise. God’s perfect love casts out fear.

Zechariah turns in the second part of his song to the role John will play in this salvation story. “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High who will go before the Lord to prepare a way for him” (1:76). Then, just as quickly, the song pivots back to Jesus again. The verb tenses shift to present future tense. Present future refers to something from the past that continues into the foreseeable future. “He will give us salvation (1.77). He will forgive us our sins (1:77). He will shine into our darkness and guide our feet in the paths of peace” (1:79).

There you have it. My abridged version of Zechariah’s song. Let me caution you here. There is danger in thinking, ‘I’ve got it. Check. I will add the content of this song to what I already know about God.’
Knowing God is not only a matter of holding certain beliefs about God. Know, in the biblical sense, is personal and experiential. It is possible for people to know God. The Hebrew word know, yada, refers to a direct, firsthand type of knowing. Some of you will recall this word from the phrase yada, yada, yada made famous from a Jerry Seinfeld episode from years ago. When the Bible says that Adam knew Eve, it refers to personal, intimate knowing.

Maybe you have heard Christian people talk about “having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” The language of personal relationship may sound strange and unimaginable to some of you. Can we really know God in the same way we can know a family member or friend?

The Bible asserts that God is, in fact, knowable. It is possible to know God in the realm of everyday existence. While Aristotle spoke of God as the “unmoved mover,” Scripture attests that we can know God in conscious, personal awareness. This is precisely the meaning of the incarnation. God takes human form in Jesus Christ so that we can know God.

There is a world of difference between knowing God and knowing about God. Knowing about God is head knowledge. Knowing God engages the heart as well as the mind. I can know God in the realm of everyday experience.

I am one who lives inside of my head much of the time. I am more comfortable in the world of ideas than I am in displaying strong emotion. Those of us who are logical and
analytical tend to minimize the value of genuine emotions and feelings for God. Don’t dismiss emotions simply as “touchy-feely.” Some of us could use more passion with God—less logic and more exuberance, less analytics and more wonder. The Bible directs us not only to believe in God but also to love God.

Let me wade into deeper water and make a few observations about heart and mind as it relates to gender. The writings of Deborah Tannen, who is a Linguistics Professor at nearby Georgetown University, have helped me in this regard. She observes that men and women have different conversational styles based on gender and cultural conditioning. She observes that men speak in report talk while women speak in rapport talk. Men communicate information to maintain status in social relationships. They want to be valued for what they know and impart information with a minimum of emotion. Women communicate more for interaction than to share information. Women converse in order to make connections with people and establish greater support circles. This may explain everything!

While I happen to agree with Tannen’s assessment about men and women, I acknowledge she speaks in generalities. Her comments are not universally true of everyone. I reference her simply to illustrate how strong we can be in one direction and weak in another facet of personality. Those who live inside our heads need to recognize the value of loving God with all our hearts. Those who predominate with
the heart need to recognize the value of offering our minds in the service of God.

A teacher of the law asked Jesus about the most important commandment. He was asking Jesus, of all the 613 laws in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), which one was the most significant. Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength” (Mark 12:30). There you have it, folks. Love God with all our hearts and all our minds. Our most profound thoughts and deepest feelings matter to God.

After Job’s friends conclude their lengthy speeches about what Job did wrong to deserve his misery, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind. God peppers Job with rapid-fire questions, 77 questions in all. Job cannot answer even one. When it is Job’s turn to speak, he confesses, “Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (42:3). Notice how Job concludes his remarks, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (42:5). Job recognizes the difference between knowing God and knowing about God.

Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? As I walk back through this song, I invite you to apply these words to your own life. As I thought about each directive in this song, some familiar Bible verses came to mind.
He will save and redeem me. Romans 8: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height or depth, nor anything else in all creation will be separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39).

He will strengthen me when I lose my grip. Philippians 4: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (4:13).

He will deliver me from my enemies, both foes without and fears within. Psalm 18: “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer. God is my rock, my shield and the horn of my salvation. I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise and he delivers me from my enemies” (18:2-3).

His promises will not fail. The prophet Habakkuk: “Though God’s promises linger, wait for them. They will certainly come. They will not delay” (2:1-3).

His love will banish fear. There is no fear in love. 1st John 4: “Perfect love casts out fear” (4:18).

He will forgive my sins. Again, from 1st John: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong” (1:9).

He will shine into my darkness. Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid (27:1).

He will guide my steps in the way of peace. Jesus’ words from John 14: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let be afraid” (14:27).