

Zechariah & Elizabeth

And suddenly, it's Advent again! I really can't figure out where the fall went. It seems like just a couple of weeks ago that I was fresh back in the pulpit after my Sabbatical, looking forward to all the things the fall promised to bring. And, indeed, it was a good autumn, with wonderful conversations in Sunday School and "Soup, Salad & Soul," the Evergreen Association Annual Meeting and Dinner Dance, the Church Council Dinner, the New Baptist Covenant II meeting... all in all a busy and fulfilling end of the church calendar year.

And now, with Advent, we begin again. For the next four weeks, I'm going to focus my sermons on stories that we know and love about the beginning of the story of Jesus. This isn't something that I've done during the other Advents we've shared together. Historically, the time of Advent in the Church has been a time of reflection and preparation, not unlike Lent. For centuries, Christian preachers used Advent to reflect on the prophecies of Christ's coming, whether that was the Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Bethlehem or the more quickly resolved prophecies of John the Baptizer or the apocalyptic language of Jesus himself about the return of the Son of Man. It's a worthy path, full of deep meaning, and I've been glad to follow it myself. But every once in a while, you've just got to have a little fun. So this Advent, we'll trace the more immediate and familiar events that led up to that manger in Bethlehem – stories that gladden our hearts for their familiarity but also have messages just as deep and important for the health of our spirits as those more imposing words from prophets and from the Christ.

The story I read a few moments ago isn't in the Revised Common Lectionary at all, I was surprised to discover, although the words of Zechariah we used as our Call to Worship do appear a couple of times. I was surprised by the omission for a couple of reasons. First, in my growing up, this was one of those evergreen stories included in every children's Bible and a regular part of the rotation of Sunday School stories in the season before Christmas. How could one of the "Bible's Top 40" be left out of the lectionary? Second, this story seems to me to be a wonderful illustration of the theme of the first week of Advent: Hope. From the underlying hope that Zechariah and Elizabeth kept alive for the future of their family and their nation, to their different initial reactions to the possibility that hope would be fulfilled, to Zechariah's final triumphantly hopeful song and the words and acts of their son as the last prophet of hope before the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the work and teaching of Jesus, this is a story saturated with hope. So, come along with me on our journey through this familiar and beloved story and let us rejoice together in the hope that it reflects.

To begin with, it is worth noting where our story begins: "In the days of King Herod of Judea." This is not an auspicious beginning. Consider, if you will, how we still mark the events of our lives with the names of the leaders of our nation. Sometimes this conjures up for us a time of peace and plenty, sometimes a time of war or economic calamity. Depending on our politics, the names we use may have different meanings to different ones of us. Most folks have fond memories of Kennedy's Camelot or of the preceding Eisenhower Administration. The Reagan Administration or the Clinton Years are likely to draw a rather more mixed response. But there would have been very little nostalgia for the reign of Herod the Great among faithful Jews. For one thing, Herod was a foreign king, imposed upon the Children of Israel through the backing of the Roman Empire. Although he had some Jewish ancestry and professed Judaism, he was actually a pagan, acting in ways far from the careful adherence to Torah promoted by the Pharisees. And he was a monster, quick to imprison and execute his enemies, responsible for the

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deaths even of many of his family. This is the leader who set the tone for Judea in the days of our story. This story begins in very dark days for Israel.

But here are our protagonists, Zechariah, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, a descendent of Aaron, Israel's first High Priest. In their bloodlines and in their joining, they represent the ongoing hope of Israel – that God has not forgotten the Chosen People, that faithfulness to the Covenant will someday result in blessings for the Children of Israel and for the nations. There can be no doubt that Zechariah and Elizabeth live lives that continue to embody that hope. Luke calls them both “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” He may have borrowed this description from his friend, Paul, who once wrote to the Philippians, defending himself, that he was, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Zechariah and Elizabeth are good reminders to us that no matter what the prevailing powers of our culture may be like, we can still live lives that give honor and glory to God.

Luke gives another description of this lovely couple that is surely meant to be a clue as to the outcome of their story. The clue is most apparent in the old King James Version: “And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.” To our modern ears, that sounds like a clue for a sad ending – two faithful people growing old with no one to look after them, the neighbors clucking that maybe they weren't as good as they seemed if God wasn't blessing them with children. But listen to this far older verse that Luke is evoking: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” Hmm... maybe there's hope for Zechariah and Elizabeth after all.

That hope springs to life one day when Zechariah is at work – or at least it should. But I'm getting ahead of myself. It would probably help to understand the story to know what Luke is talking about when he says that Zechariah's “section was on duty” and all this stuff about lots and incense. At this point in Israel's history, there were so many descendents of priestly families eligible to serve in the Temple that they had to be divided into sections. Richard Vinson writes for the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, “Each section rotated into Jerusalem for a week twice a year; that is only fourteen days of active service, with only twenty-eight chances to perform the sacrifice or offer the incense. ... within each section, priests who had never offered incense would cast lots to see who would take the turn... Zechariah, the righteous, aging priest, had been waiting for the lot to fall on him for years, probably just as long as he had been waiting for a child.”

Can you imagine, then, how he must have felt? After a lifetime of faithful service, he finally got his chance to enter the Holy Place to burn the incense on behalf of the people. And when he got there, there was an angel waiting for him. An angel with a personal message for him from God! And what a message! Let's look carefully at what Gabriel had to say. “The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...”” A faithful priest like Zechariah surely would have recognized the similarity to the scripture in the book of Judges at the beginning of the story of Samson: “the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.”” Zechariah hears Gabriel continue, “...he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink...” Why, these were things said in

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the Scriptures about the great prophet Samuel! His mother had vowed that he would be a Nazirite, never drinking alcohol, and I Samuel 3:19 records that “the child Samuel became great before the Lord.” As if this were not enough for a proud father, Gabriel says that the boy will have “the spirit and power of Elijah,” fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi: “I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.” Last, but certainly not least, Gabriel indicates that Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son, to be named John, will fulfill the prayer of David recorded in II Samuel 7, when he thanks God, “for preparing your people Israel for yourself as your own people.”

The dazed Zechariah hears Gabriel tell him that his son is going to be a composite of some of the greatest heroes of Israel: Samson, Samuel, Elijah, David. Perhaps that is why his belief failed him. As a priest, he would have known the stories about and teachings of these great Men of God deep down to his core. These were *his* heroes, his dreams all come true. He stammers, he questions: “Are you sure you’ve got the right guy? I’m Zechariah, my wife is Elizabeth. We’re OLD, you know.” Some friends of mine, knowing that I was going to preach on this passage today, have offered both questions and helpful suggestions. How come Mary questioned and was blessed while Zechariah questioned and was struck dumb? I won’t claim to know the mind of God, but I suspect God expected a little more from an experienced and knowledgeable priest than from a young girl. Zechariah should have known that God could do these things. He’d spent his whole life studying the Scriptures. The references to those other stories should have reminded him what God can do. Instead, he was overwhelmed.

Before we decide that Zechariah deserves our condemnation along with his divine chastisement of speechlessness, perhaps we should ask ourselves, do we always receive God’s Good News with gladness and wholehearted belief? Or are we also sometimes guilty of wondering if God’s talking to the right person? Jesus said, “sell all you have and give it to the poor... love your enemies and bless those that curse you... turn the other cheek... forgive your brother and sister until you lose count of how many times you’ve forgiven them... Give to those who ask... Lend, expecting nothing in return...” Really, God, really? All the time? Me? Zechariah may be a little more like us than we’d like to admit.

Elizabeth comes off rather better in the story than her husband. Richard Vinson calls her “a spunky woman who can stand up for herself but who does not insist on her own prestige.” Personally, I’d include her in my ever-growing list of “Uppity Women of the Bible.” Her response to her unexpected pregnancy is eminently practical. I can almost hear her across the centuries, “They’re never going to believe this until they can see it.” So she goes into seclusion until she is six months along and her swelling belly and breasts can confirm the story that would have seemed like nonsense to the neighbor ladies if she’d just told them. The news brings her newly pregnant cousin Mary to see her and Elizabeth and her unborn son become the first witnesses to God’s best Good News, the first prophets of the New Testament. As Vinson said, Elizabeth, herself the bearer of a miracle child, gives pride of place to her cousin. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Immediately, Elizabeth goes from being the

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heroine of her own story to recognizing the greatness that her cousin represents. As her son, John, will do later, she points away from herself to the Savior that God has sent for her people and for the world.

But Elizabeth is no doormat, either. Whether she has somehow managed to get the whole “I saw an angel in the Temple” story from Zechariah and his tablet or whether Gabriel also visited her, we cannot know but Elizabeth understands that her son must be named John. When all the neighbors and relations gather for the *bris*, they want to keep family tradition alive with the child’s name. His father can’t speak and his mother, they think, does not count. But Elizabeth stands her ground until someone thinks to find Zechariah’s writing implements.

It is Zechariah’s second chance. This time, he does not question the words of the angel but writes it out, clear and strong: “His name is John.” It is another sign of God’s grace that Zechariah’s delayed faith immediately removes the mark of punishment from him. His voice is restored and he breaks into song, praising God and God’s future for Creation. May God grant that we all do so well with the second, third, fourth and infinite chances that our Loving Creator offers us. Zechariah’s great song has been known in the usage of the Church as the Benedictus, the Latin translation of its first two words, “Blessed be...” It reminds us first of all of God’s promise to the Children of Israel and foretells the coming of a redeemer from the house of David, Jesus. The early verses could certainly be interpreted as the restoration of the earthly kingdom of Israel under a Davidic monarch. Indeed, Zechariah might have meant them in this way, as all his contemporaries anticipated this resolution to God’s promise. But seen from our vantage point, they also point to the spiritual redemption offered by Jesus, for in him we are redeemed from our spiritual enemies, sin and death, the powers of greed and selfishness, of lust and anger. The latter part of the Benedictus certainly turns in this direction as Zechariah prophesies for his son that John will bring the people knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins through the tender mercy of God. And Zechariah, like the great prophets of Israel before him, understands that God’s mercy is not limited to Israel but is also for those who sit in darkness, for the Gentiles. With his tongue loosed, Zechariah sings God’s praise and points to the universal love of the Creator.

There is one more character in this story, of course, one more member of the family. We do not read the rest of his story until later in Luke’s Gospel but it is clear from the beginning that he is someone special. John, later known as the Baptizer, is, as Gabriel announced, a worthy successor to Samson and David, Samuel and Elijah. He is strong enough to withstand life in the wilderness, a leader to whom the people flock. The Holy Spirit is strong within him from the very beginning: still *in utero*, he leaps for joy at the presence of his cousin Jesus. And, as foretold both by Gabriel and by his father, he prepares the way for the work and teaching of Jesus, chastising those whose spiritual arrogance has led them to ignore the real teachings of Torah and reminding them of their duties to God and to neighbor: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the government agents, he said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” To those backed with the power of arms, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” These are messages which still need to be heard by some today.

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John's calling was in many ways unique, of course. None of us will have the opportunity to preach to Israel just ahead of the earthly ministry of Jesus. That day has come and gone. But we can, nevertheless, live in the same Holy Spirit that was in John. How do we measure success? Through money, fame, popularity? Or do we, as the Interpreter's Bible puts it, "so walk in the light of God's countenance as to open the way for God's increasing presence in our world; to teach people to find their only ultimate salvation, not in the manipulations of their power or pride, but through the humble and contrite heart that can reach out for the forgiveness of their sins; to bring in the dawn of a new day that only God can give, so that those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death may be guided into the way of peace."

Zechariah, Elizabeth, John – three people living in dark and dangerous times, in a country occupied by its enemies and seemingly forgotten by God. Yet they lived in righteousness, blameless in God's sight, keeping alive the hope that God would yet send a Redeemer. And so it came to pass that they saw that Redeemer, all three of them – Zechariah and Elizabeth encountering him as a yet-unborn child, John baptizing the young man Jesus and saying to his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Their hope was fulfilled and our hope is still fulfilled by the One who was and who is and who is to come – Jesus, the Christ of God. We live in a far freer state than did they but still we face the chains of sin, of addiction, of brokenness, of death. The child whose birth we celebrate at the end of our Advent time of anticipation came to free us from those chains and from everything that would bind us. He came down that we may have love, peace, joy and life abundant and eternal. Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes again and again to us to set us free. Let us heed God's call, to go among all peoples with a word of comfort, with a word of peace, teaching all people to turn again to God and to accept God's love, and showing forth the glory of our Loving Creator. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God and Mother of us all, Amen.