

**Sermon: November 28, 2021 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent. Luke 1: 68-80**  
**Ralph Connor & Rundle Memorial United Churches – Rev Greg Wooley**

Each year in the season of Advent, the scriptures lead us to consider what it is to wait expectantly: our expectant waiting for the full emergence of the new realm of love and justice that Christ proclaimed, and revisiting the narratives of two expectant households, those of Mary and her kinswoman, Elizabeth.

Within those birth narratives, a story that doesn't get much of a spotlight, is the story of Zechariah – and that's a shame, as the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is truly a hidden gem. I recognize that it can be a triggering story for those who have struggled with infertility, or for those who are non-verbal, yet there is much here worthy of our attention.

With the assistance of James Cooper and his *Why Christmas* website, here's a summary of their story: Elizabeth – a relative of Mary's – and her husband Zechariah were both of priestly lineage. They were both regarded as "old" and when I did a bit of digging, learned that "old" probably meant, "in their early sixties", which I find a bit disconcerting, for obvious reasons but, oh well.... This couple was childless and as we have learned in other Bible stories, that carried a heavy social stigma for both of them. They kept on praying for a child, but it appeared that the sand had run out of the hourglass.

The task of sprinkling incense on the Temple altar was something that a priest got to do, at most, once in a lifetime. The day came when it Zechariah's name was drawn and at this place in the Jewish service only he as the incense priest, would have been in this part of the temple. Zechariah poured the incense on to the altar but before he could bow and leave to say the final prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared by the altar, declaring that Elizabeth would have a child who would do great things, a son to be named John. Although he had prayed for this for decades, once he was told it would finally happen, Zechariah did not think that this could possibly come true. For this moment of unbelief, Gabriel removed Zechariah's ability to speak, not to be restored until he saw and admitted the truth of the angel's words.

The other priests, waiting outside that part of the temple, would have wondered what was happening because Zechariah had taken a long time to pour the incense. When he came out, they knew something was up because he couldn't speak the final prayer.

Elizabeth did become pregnant as the angel had told Zechariah, and later in Advent we will spend some time with the visit between old Elizabeth and her very young kinswoman Mary, as they compared experiences of unexpected pregnancies.

When Elizabeth gave birth, and it was time to name the baby, it was natural for the family to think that it would be called Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth had a sense that he had to be called John, a name signifying God's faithfulness. Some doubted this, so they asked Zechariah what he should be called. Requesting a writing

tablet, he wrote “his name is John” – and as the angel had said, at that moment he could speak again spoke words of blessing – known in Christian tradition as the Song of Zechariah, or the Benedictus .

Zechariah and Elizabeth are commemorated within the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran Churches, and there is a tradition that Zechariah died a martyr at the time of the killing of the innocents, protecting his son from Herod’s seek-and-destroy mission.

So we have this great story of hope and doubt, of God’s faithfulness and human inability to embrace God’s unlimited grace, and of the intertwined stories of Jesus, who pointed people toward God while announcing the dawning of a new realm, and his cousin John, who announced the need for repentance while pointing people to Jesus.

While in some way, what happens to Zechariah might appear punitive and somewhat random, within the arc of the story it’s kind of a natural consequence. Zechariah and Elizabeth have for decades been fervently praying for a child, a divine messenger says, “guess what? Your prayers are answered!” and the first words out of Zechariah’s mouth were, “I don’t think so.” Not thank you or bless you or hallelujah or as our dear friend Margaret Lumsden would say, Praise God, Praise God, Praise God, no, nothing like that. When told that his prayers had been answered, Zechariah put it through the likely-vs-unlikely meter, and determined that it simply could not be so. At that moment, Zechariah had the sacred duty of speaking a temple prayer, but sizing up the situation the Angel more or less said, “well, perhaps someone who DOES believe in God’s ability to do the impossible can say the prayer today. Zechariah, consider yourself silenced.”

I see in this encounter, a significant stumble at a pivotal time, yet I have a hard time judging this old Priest, a guy about my age. For his story causes me to look at my own story and ask, how many times in my life, have I done the same thing as Zechariah, in the presence of answered prayer? How often have I seen signs of God’s grace, and failed to name them as such? And not just, how many times in my life have I been in the presence of God’s loving activity and failed to name it and lift it up, but how many times *in a typical day*, do I do this?

As a follower of Jesus Christ, it is my duty to view, analyze and act upon the tangible and political realities of the world around me in the same manner that Jesus would. As a follower of Jesus Christ, I am called to be sensitive to vulnerabilities, to listen to the cries of those lives are not taken into account in the decisions of government or the conventions of society, those who are at risk, those who have been targeted and those who have been made functionally invisible. In general, as United Church folks, I think that these things are pretty broadly understood as what it means to be a disciple. Whether we actually DO these things is another matter, but this core commitment to social justice as a response to Jesus is something that I’ve understood for a long, long time... and when I see advances, I do perceive the Holy Spirit at work. Over the years I have noticed, and named, and praised important social advances as the will of God being expressed.

But what about the more “devotional” side of what it means to follow Jesus. That, I find harder to attend to, especially when things are as chaotic and stressful and relentless as these past twenty months have been. To pray, to listen for Divine guidance, to notice and thankfully acknowledge when prayer is answered. To pause, when I am in problem-solving mode, and discern where God is in the moment and where the Holy Spirit is stirring. To acknowledge when I have gotten it wrong, and to be patient with others when it takes them multiple attempts to get things right. To hold in prayer those with very different opinions than my own. To nurture tiny seedlings of hope when they burst through the dry, cracked soil of my life: seeking hope, recognizing hope, believing the testimony of hope from hopeful people when I am unable to perceive it myself.

Around me, lives are positively transformed by a God who does hear and answer, as fears are addressed, as addictions and negative spirals are broken, as people’s lives turn around in unexpected ways. In the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah and John, and in Zechariah’s powerful prayer, the fullness of this advent season comes into view, both the political aspect of what John and Jesus will be about as their words and actions clash with those of the powerbrokers, but also the devotional, spiritual aspect of what it means to be renewed, changed, restored by the power of a God who loves us passionately and persistently. Too often, I find it hard to grasp God’s gracious ways, but they are there for the hearing today: a celebration of the God who is present to the sufferings of the world, a God who sets ahead of us a brighter horizon line of hope.

Once Zechariah’s voice could be heard once more, the story stops for a moment, and we are invited into a private, tender, beautiful moment between Father and Son. Holding his young son John, this long-time priest speaks to him a blessing that embraces all of this: acknowledging God’s actions over the ages, and then he forecasts the pivotal role to be played by this young child, John, naming the reconciling love to be offered by Christ. Hear once more these words from parent to child, words of hope and light and faith as recounted by Eugene Peterson in his Bible translation, *The Message*:

And you, my child, “Prophet of the Highest,” will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,  
to present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins.  
Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God’s Sunrise will break in upon us,  
Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death,  
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.

While he could not find it in himself earlier to thank God, the aging priest found all the words he needed later on, words of prophetic blessing while holding his infant son in his arms. He speaks as one who could not previously be heard but now cannot be silenced. Zechariah proclaims that his son, John the Baptist, will name the world’s brokenness and evil intent and appeal for people to repent and seek justice... and that John’s cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, will receive those who turn toward him seeking that world founded in justice and enrich their lives, even unto life beyond life. No wonder these words, honouring deliverance of many kinds, have for centuries been spoken within services of morning prayer.

As we prepare in this season of Advent, to enter into the world of Elizabeth and Mary, Zechariah and Joseph, John and Jesus, my prayer is that we too will express in our lives a full and active commitment to God's ways of equity and fairness, accompanied by prayerful gratitude to that very same God who is the source of all life. In the name of God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, Amen.

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