

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 1:57-80

Before we read today's scripture, I want to give a condensed version of what happened earlier in this chapter. The gospel begins with Zechariah, a priest from the Judean hillside, in Jerusalem for the week, serving in the temple. The story tells us of the day he was chosen to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. This was a once in a lifetime honor of bringing the sacrifice to the altar and clean off the ashes. It's during this task that an Angel visits - during the pinnacle of Zechariah's life of priestly service - and tells him that his prayers have been heard, he will have a son and that he is to name him John. The angel says he will be great in the sight of the Lord

and that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, turning many back to God. Z, wanting a sign, not believing this could be so, because he and his wife, E, are old, is struck dumb by the angel for his unbelief. He stumbles out of the temple, dazed, unable to speak, taking much longer than expected in his work. He tried to tell them, the crowd waiting outside, tried to communicate what happened in there, but was unable. When his time of service was ended, he went home to his wife, Elizabeth.

The gospel then jumps six months later, where the same angel, Gabriel, visits a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, named Mary, and tells her she, too, will have a miraculous birth. Mary simply asks 'how can this be?', and when told, replies 'here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' She then set out, in haste, to visit her relative, E, who is filled with the Holy Spirit as she greets Mary. They remain together for about 3 months, then Mary returned to her home.

The gospel continues... (Nel and I read scripture together)

SERMON: *(May the words of my lips... take a full breath.)*

The people of Israel were waiting, waiting for centuries for the promises of God to be fulfilled, for a time when they would be rescued from their enemies and serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness, or justice. It was a long wait. And now, finally, in this out of the way village, an old priest is told that he and his wife are going to have a son who will be called the prophet of the Most High, who will go before the Lord to prepare his ways - ways that will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, guiding their feet into the way of peace.

It's been a long wait, a weary wait, where the people of Israel haven't heard a prophet in over 300 years, where the people of Israel have lived under the harsh rule of Roman occupation for the past 60 years. Living in fear, oppressed, worshiping God in an uneasy alliance with the Roman authorities. But... But now E, in her old age, is

miraculously pregnant, and when she gives birth her relatives and neighbors gather and rejoice with her, giving thanks that God has shown great mercy on her.

On the eighth day, at the time of circumcision, they gather again, this time to perform the ancient religious custom of marking this child as a chosen one of God and to name him. “They” were going to name the child Z, after his father, as was the custom. The ‘they’ is not named, presumably the male relatives and priests of the village. E, named by the writer is a voiceless participant in this ritual, side lined, marginalized by the crowd, not seen as a knowledgeable part of the equation. But this voiceless, marginalized mother comes forward and proclaims a holy “No”. No, she says. Things are not what you think they are. This child is not who you think he is. No. E stands up to the crowd around her and speaks. He is to be called John, a name which means ‘God is gracious’.

What is happening here? Who does she think she is? Traditionally the father is the one to name the baby, as a way of claiming the child as his own. Here, in the beginning of this gospel, we have the writer giving all kinds of clues that this message, this Good News, is not going to follow the standard norms. Here, already in this first chapter, angels visit old men and virgins, and women claim their voice, their power to stand up and say No.

This ‘No’ that E speaks - It’s a Holy No, H-O-L-Y No, a No that wants to set things right. E gives the proper name, the name she knows is true, and her husband, Z, affirms her proclamation.

Naming throughout the ages has been seen as a powerful act. Giving someone, or something, its true name, was a sacred act. A true name is a name of a thing or being that expresses, or is somehow identical to, its true nature. The ancient Jews considered God's true name so potent that uttering it aloud gave the speaker great power over creation. To prevent this abuse, God’s true name was rarely spoken. Throughout the book of Genesis, the giving of names was a significant part of the biblical narrative. After creating the wild animals and birds, God "brought the man to

see what he would call each one; and whatever the man called it, that became the creature's name" - giving man dominion and power over them.

And so this day, E boldly states that her son is to be called John, meaning "God is Gracious". E, the voiceless and marginalized woman, spoke power that day when she said No and rightly named him. What courage it must have taken for E to stand up to that crowd of men, of leaders and authorities, and speak the truth. (Let's hold onto that thread, as I'll come back to it in a moment).

I want to shift gears now and listen to Z, who gains his voice only after E properly names their son. Given a tablet by the unbelieving authorities, he writes 'his name is John' and with that rightful naming his tongue is freed and he begins praising God. It feels like he just gave E a verbal High Five of joyful affirmation! Yes, E is right. I agree with her, he says. Way to go Z!

Z is then filled with the Holy Spirit and blesses God and his newborn son with this 2 part prophecy. At first Z blesses the Lord God of Israel for looking favorably on his people, naming *this* act, *this* time in history, as when the promises made to their ancestors, promises made by God that they will be rescued from their enemies so they can serve God without fear, are being fulfilled. Fulfilled here, now, by this child. Their waiting is over. Centuries of waiting to be rescued so they can serve God without fear - the time is now. The second part of the prophetic blessing is for his infant son, John, where Z boldly proclaims John's role in their coming freedom. This child will be prophet of the Most High, preparing the way for the One who will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, who will guide their feet into the way of peace.

I had an 'ah-ha' moment this week as I sat with this passage and I want to share it with you, because it felt really important to me and to our work here, as God's people, in the 21st Century. My 'ah-ha' was that this proclamation, this time of joy that the waiting

was over, that their savior was coming into their midst, was in its infancy, literally. All of the people gathered around E and Z, all of the shepherds in the fields who rejoiced at Jesus' birth, the wise ones who visited - most likely none of them lived to see the day when John and Jesus began their ministry. That was still 30 years away. It's unlikely that any of them lived to see these promises come into fruition. They were witness to the birth of the God doing something radically new in the world, but they would not live to see or hear the Good News in action. No, their work was to tend these young, fragile, lives. Their faithful waiting and work was not done. Their job was to teach, to instruct, to guide, to grow these future leaders in the ways of God. To tell them the stories of how God had been with their people throughout the ages, abounding in mercy, steadfast in love. These gathered with Z and E, with Mary and Joseph, they never saw the fruits of their labor, yet they had work to do: Faith-filled work to help usher in the kingdom of God, the time when they would walk in peace.

The latest issue of *The Mennonite* appeared in my mailbox this week, and last evening I read an article by John Paul Lederach, one who works as a bridge builder and peace maker in war torn areas around the world. His reflection is named '*Advent Manifesto: Does my soul still sing?*' It's a beautiful piece, intriguing me to Google him and listen to a YouTube talk he gave at the Next Generation Peace Conference in 2016. He said that to bring on peace you need to think in decades. Decades - like Z and E, Mary and Joseph, and those gathered around these new-born infants. That you need to invest in more than content - that to grow peace, to nurture peaceful leaders, your focus requires a radical patience, that the quality of relationships is of utmost importance. He says it's not rocket science. That perhaps the greatest gift we can offer in the face of fear and loss is one of embodied presence. That maybe the best things we can do are the little things - just a word of encouragement; a word of support and to offer to be alongside someone.

He spoke of Druhi, a Nepali woman, a widow, earning about a dollar every other week to feed and support her mother, herself and her children. She was so desperate that at

one point she bought a vile of poison, ready to end their misery. Then, through a series of events, she was invited to be a mediator in her village, was trained and paid enough to support her family. He said that when Druhi walked into a room, all 4'8" of her, she commanded a presence. When asked what was most helpful to her early on, she said someone told her 'Druhi, you're good at this'. She'd never heard that before. It transformed her.

That, and other simple stories like it, gives me hope. It reminds me that our work, here, doing justice, giving voice to those on the margins, aiding the refugees, tending and protecting the earth - however we work for peace in this world- we may not see the end, we may not see much progress, for the work may take decades, but we are called to rightly name what we see, to do the work of righteousness and justice and to trust that God is part of the process.

This week, in her own small yet faith-filled way, Hope Brubaker lived out this calling. She went to rightly name what she sees as injustice and to call for a different way, a way of peace. Hope asked to speak to the board of Abundant Blessings Thrift Store about their decision to withdraw funding to MCC due to MCC's work in supporting the people of Palestine - the poor, marginalized, voiceless who are working for peace in their land. Now, no matter what you think of these politics, what I want to hold up is that Hope brought her voice, speaking on behalf of the voiceless, not knowing if it would be heard, but planting a seed, offering another perspective, one that calls for peace for all.

Lord, make me, make us, instruments of your peace:

where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

That's the work for peace we are called to take up - to sow love, to understand, to bring hope. To speak a Holy No to the injustice we observe. We are not told we will see the fruits of our labor, but asked to faithfully do the work, trusting that God is doing the work in us, through us, with us. That Emmanuel, God with us, is part of our work today.

Just as E spoke up and gave her son his true, God given name, so we are to do our part, even if we feel marginalized and powerless. We may not see the end point, may not even know what justice and peace rightfully look like, but we are called to be a people who boldly proclaim the message in our actions - perhaps small and seemingly insignificant acts of radical love and kindness in our world. It might be an act as small as taping a paper menorah in your window as a sign of solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters. No matter how small, our work is to name God's desire for peace.

O divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.