

Advent 2: Laying the Foundation (peace)

Luke 1:57-80

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 favourably 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.

BEFORE SCRIPTURE READING

During the Advent and Christmas season, we usually jump from gospel to gospel, hearing bits and pieces of different stories - not too concerned when details don't match. This season, we'll be focused mostly on the stories found in the gospel of Luke, and before we hear our scripture for today, I want to give a little background and context.

Luke's gospel was written by a gentile for gentiles - a very different audience than, say, Matthew's gospel, which was composed with a Jewish audience in mind.

This gospel **starts** with two interwoven birth stories.

Amy-Jill Levine, Jewish New Testament scholar, suggests that by casting the nativity stories of John the Baptist and Jesus in the cadences of the scriptures of the Old Testament, this gospel brings a seamless movement from the stories of ancient Israel to the Christian story.¹

Luke creates a sense of continuity between Israel's scriptures and the good news, the gospel, written for Jews and gentiles alike.

Our passage today is from the very end of the first chapter - where a lot has already happened.

The very first story in Luke's gospel has the priest Zechariah meeting an angel of the Lord while in the sanctuary. Zech walks out of that holy place, muted, unable to speak, for questioning the promises of the angel - the promise of a child.

Tucked in the middle of the narrative of Zech, his wife Eliz, and the birth of their son, we meet the young woman, Mary, as she, too, is visited by an angel and told of her part in the fulfillment of God's long awaited promises.

Wow! All this in the first chapter!

A weaving together of unexpected pronouncements by angels and unexpected pregnancies of young and old. Just what is God up to here?

My friends, some of us were raised hearing these stories year after year; raised to listen without asking questions, or to wonder or be curious.

This gospel, Luke's gospel, invites us to curiosity. As one commentator writes:

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill and Brettler, Marc Zvi. 2011. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford Press. Page 96.

This Gospel contains challenge and promise... stimulating valuable questions rather than providing final answers,..²

So listen, as we pick up the story as it weaves back into the lives of Elizabeth, cousin of Mary, and her husband, the voiceless Zechariah.

SERMON

I'm curious -

How do you break silence, end periods of silence?

When you wake up in the morning - night time likely being the longest period of silence in our days.

How do you break the silence?

Reach for your phone? Mutter as you stumble into the bathroom?

Chances are you don't break out in song - filled with the Spirit... proclaiming God's goodness. But I suppose this was new for Zechariah as well.

Yet still, being aware of how we begin anew, matters.

Might we be intentional?

Beginning with a blessing?

Might we make space for the Spirit to bless us as we begin again?

Making space for the Spirit to bless us and for us to bless others...

Luke tells us Zech was filled with the Holy Spirit. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he opens his mouth and blesses God.

The Spirit is very active in the first 4 chapters of this gospel - over and over the Spirit moves people to proclamation, to name God as the one who remembers and who saves. Nothing happens in Luke's gospel without the movement of the Spirit.

Earlier in this first chapter of Luke, Mary is filled with the Spirit as she praises God and welcomes her role in the coming of Jesus, the One who saves.

In a few weeks we'll hear Eliz's blessing on Mary when she's filled with the H.S.

² Schaberg, Jane and Ringe, Sharon. 2012. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press. P. 493.

Jesus' first sermon, in LUke 4 - is when he is filled with the Spirit

The Spirit gives words of praise.

The Spirit gives power, imagination.

In this inspired blessing, Zech is telling us who God is - how good God is.

And he gets personal, very personal, shifting from reminding the people how God remembers and rescues them from the powers of darkness to speaking, intimately, to his newborn son.

Zechariah gave one of the greatest gifts he could give to his son.

He gave him a foundation rooted in his belovedness of God—words of purpose, pride, love, and belonging.

In the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, we see the foundation of what is to come. We see how interwoven John's story is with Jesus' origin story.

When Zechariah regains his voice, his imagination is also restored. He offers deep praise for God's tender mercy, and casts a hopeful vision for his own child.

He sings blessings into John's being.

This lays the foundation for John's life. In turn, John will go on to prepare the way for Jesus who will guide us all in the way of peace.

In this second week of Advent, we focus on making space—in our lives and our imaginations—for God's blessings to break through.

And, perhaps, for God to speak blessings through us.

From our confession this morning we heard these words:

“When John was Born, Zechariah leaned down and whispered words of love into his ear.”

I want to watch a video together about ways we might whisper words of love to others, how we might bless others - reminding them of their belovedness - not just to newborns, but to everyone.

WATCH VIDEO

From the video:

It's not about what you do, it's about who you are...
You're made from love to be love to spread love.
Love is always louder, no matter what.
Let your life be loud.³

Long, long ago -
Zech spoke words of praise to the people who were waiting...
Waiting for something new to break through into their lives
Waiting for God's promises of old to come to pass.
Zech speaks to those who are tired of waiting...who wonder if God still remembers them...

And Zech speaks to the new life before him
Blessing the newness
Instructing this new life - that it's "By the tender mercy of our God"
It's through the tender mercy of God that all these things will come to pass.

You're made from love, to be love, to spread love.
Love is always louder, no matter what.
Let your life be loud.⁴

Who's helped lay a foundation of faith for you?

Mary Overholt is one of the first people who comes to my mind.
Mary, and her husband, Lewis, arrived in Americus Georgia about a year before we did, in 1988, to plant a new Mennonite church there.
The first few years we met in their living room, crammed in together, singing, discussing scripture, and eating.
Always eating together.
Mary was behind the scenes - a quiet leader in her own way.
We started attending Americus Mennonite Fellowship a few months after my mom died.
I was 23 and really searching in my faith.
I had so many questions and struggled to make sense of God.
Mary made space for me - for my doubt, for my hope, for my yearnings.
She blessed me - laying a foundation of faith that was built not on worthiness or having our prayers answered in the ways we wanted,
but a foundation that was built on God's belovedness for all of us -
that we belonged, and were called to join in the work of building God's kingdom here, and now.

How about you?

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5-EwrhsMzY>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5-EwrhsMzY>

What are the words, the blessings, the actions of others that have laid the foundation for your life?

Who helped lay a foundation of faith for you?

How are you doing this for others?