

Sermon 24.12.15

Kate Heinzl, pastor University Mennonite Church

ADVENT WEEK 3

Luke 1: 5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

MAIN THESIS: *Why yet another gospel? What is Luke wanting us to understand about Jesus, here, in this first story?*

SERMON

Want to recap some of the lessons that Dr. Leticia Guardiola Saenz brought to us last week:

The first is to remember that each gospel is set in a specific context and time. Mark and Matthew's gospels are already circulating around the community and yet Luke chooses to write a third. He has something new to offer, a new perspective on understanding Jesus and what it means to live two generations after his life and death.

As time passed, the Gospel needed to be reframed to help the community understand the delay of Christ's return, and so Luke reframes the story of Jesus yet again.

Luke paints a larger picture, he reframes the hope of Jesus by situating it in the overall salvation picture of God's promises to Israel. Jesus is part of this much bigger story, and so are we, the reader.

"Today a savior is born" an angel tells the shepherds in Luke 2. Salvation *has* arrived, it's not something we're waiting for. Jesus doesn't become the savior - he is it, from before his birth. Salvation is here among us.

This is a key message we'll see repeatedly in Luke's gospel - **salvation is here and now**. God is acting here and now, in us and through us, through the Holy Spirit.

This salvation started before Jesus, it was made manifest in his birth, and with the Spirit present in us, we are to keep the transforming work of Christ going.

One of the key messages of Luke is that salvation, transformation, is here and now.

Another theme in this gospel is the emphasis on worship and prayer - it starts here, in our story today - this first story of this gospel - with Z in the temple. The gospel ends (the very last verse of the gospel) with Jesus' disciples being 'continually in the temple blessing God'. Throughout this gospel, Luke reminds the community that it is to take part in worship and prayer.

One way that's done is through the use of liturgical hymns - last week heard Mary's song and Z's blessing - before the birth narratives are done, the angels will sing to the shepherds, praising God, and Simeon will praise God as he takes the infant Jesus into his arms and blesses him and his family.

One last central theme in Luke is the centrality of women in this gospel - it's ironic that here in this first story, Z, the priest, is made mute, unable to speak, making space for us to hear the women in the story.

This gospel starts with a story that is found in neither Mark nor Matthew. We have a story of the parents of a prophet.

We're told both Zachariah and Elizabeth are descendants of a priestly class; they are righteous and blameless; they're old and without children.

This first paragraph of this first story in this gospel firmly roots us in the history of Israel. Zachariah and Elizabeth call to mind Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and her husband, Elkhana, those righteous parents of old who trusted in the promises of God and waited for a child.

Here we meet El and Zachariah, those who are committed to living out God's commandments as they wait. Wait for a child of their own and wait for the coming of the long expected Messiah.

This is how Luke's gospel begins, setting the stage with a priest who is going about his ordinary business when he is suddenly met by an angel, a divine messenger.

Have you ever been in a situation where all you heard were the first words... you won! Or a doctor telling you 'we found a spot'... and that's all you heard. Everything else is just like the teacher in a Charlie Brown special that goes 'wa wa wa'.

It's known as cognitive shutdown - when we're overwhelmed or stressed - We hear those first words, that first phrase, and we miss everything that comes afterwards.

We're so caught by that initial idea, and our minds start spinning stories around it - I won! And all the details of what it means to have won the lottery are lost on us....

I imagine that's what happened to Zechariah.

This older priest goes into the temple to perform the ritual incense offering, which he likely won by a lottery of all the priests - when he discovers he's not by himself. Right next to the altar there's an angel.

That alone, even before the angel opens his mouth, would be enough to cause a brain freeze.

And yet the angel doesn't waste much time. "Do not be afraid" he says, then launches into the amazing news - "your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son..."

Did John hear anything after that - the name, the way the child must live, the holy work ahead of him? Or did John only really hear and take in, 'your wife will bear a son'. Did his mind start asking a million questions, trying to make sense of this impossibility?

And so when the angel is done explaining all the minute details, dear Zechariah blurts out a question to that initial bombshell of a statement - 'how will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.'

It's like he's staying, slow down, can we back up a minute?

I think Z gets a bad rap - but the angel cuts him no slack - I came to give you this good news, and since you didn't believe me, you're going to be mute until the birth.

He goes out, signaling to the crowd with hand gestures, and heads home. Elizabeth conceives and says 'this is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured'.

God has done great things - has looked favorably on this lowly woman. We heard Mary proclaim something nearly identical in her song of praise 'my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant'.

What a beginning of this "orderly account" of the events of Jesus' life that Luke sets out to offer us, the reader!

Luke begins with the story of a prophet that will soon be born - one with the power of Elijah. Where Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, Luke begins with a unique story of a family that reminds us of the leaders of old - ties the story of Jesus with echoes of Abraham, Sarah, Hannah and Samuel. He's signaling to his listeners that God is still at work. We heard the songs of Mary and Zechariah last week proclaiming with such hope that God is with us, throughout all generations - has always been there for us.

While God's outward presence has been quiet, God's faithfulness continues.

And here's how it's going to show up in this place and time. No matter that you're under the thumb of King Herod - you will have Joy, Zechariah!

Joy! for your child will be great, filled with the Holy Spirit before his birth.

How did those early listeners hear this story? They, too, had been waiting - waiting for the return of Jesus. Waiting and waiting.

Luke begins with this story, signaling to the listener that the Holy Spirit was at work before Jesus was even conceived. The work of the Holy Spirit continues. Just as God's presence sustained Abraham and blessed Hannah with divine spirit - so it continues.

Right from this first story we see how the Spirit, this all embracing Spirit, shows up and continues to transform ordinary folks.

Throughout Luke's gospel we will hear Jesus remind his followers that the Spirit is at work in them and through them- salvation, transformation, is here.

It's a message that asks us to embrace what's here, to be sustained by the Spirit, and to continue the work - **Advent is a time of preparing for Love to be born anew.**

I recently learned of a Japanese character *setsu* translated as 'to embrace and sustain'. (SLIDE) This character has both an active and passive aspect. On the left is the symbol for a hand, conveying the idea of actively helping. On the right are three symbols for the ear, implying passive, receptive listening. The character means simultaneously embracing and sustaining AND being embraced and

sustained. We might interpret the character *setsu* as encouraging us to be three-quarters observant and one-quarter actively helpful. First we receive and understand and then give a hand appropriately.

Setsu - being observant so that we can then do the work we are given.

Zechariah, who was mute for many long months, was given the opportunity to deeply listen and observe. What did he notice about his wife, Elizabeth? How did this listening impact his way of being with her?

What happens to us when we listen more than we speak? When we look for the Spirit at work around us, even in these days of darkness?

Z and Eliz lived in oppressive times, and yet Joy and gladness was promised, not just to them, but the people of Judea.

How might *setsu* - embracing and sustaining, and being embraced and sustained - by the Spirit and by the hope and joy that is here - not dependent on outer circumstances, but in us, be a guiding light this season?

Advent - a time of preparing for Love to be born anew. We watch and wait, embraced and sustained by the promises of old.

may we live out the message of Love being here, in our midst, embracing and sustaining us as we step into the unknowns with joy.