

Dumbstruck by Disbelief!

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Scriptures: Isaiah 11:1-9, Luke 1:5-25
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Introduction: You have most likely heard that Presbyterians like things done decently and in order...a reflection of our sense of governance and process. The Gospel of Luke, then, must be the Presbyterian Gospel...In the first verses Luke tells us that this is meant to be an ORDERLY account Written to the most excellent Theophilus- *theo* meaning God and *philo* meaning friend. Theophilus means a specific man, a Roman citizen, but most likely Luke is writing to you and to me, to all friends of God who stand ready to hear the Good News. This account is written around the year 70- some 37 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps a time of crisis, as it coincides with the year that the Temple is again destroyed, the followers of Jesus wanted to make a record, a historiography, of the truth. In fact, that is purpose according to verse 4. This orderly account is written that you might know the truth of these things which you have been instructed. This passage is the story of God's Messenger Gabriel visiting Zechariah and announcing the birth of John the Baptist. Hear now God's word to Theophilus and all friends of God.

Scripture: Luke 1:5-25

⁵In 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.

⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty,
⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

¹³But 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.

¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

¹⁵for 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.

¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

¹⁷With 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.”

¹⁸Zechariah 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.”

¹⁹The 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.

²⁰But 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.”

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary.

²²When 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.

²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said,

²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Proclamation of the WORD

Zechariah and Elizabeth have been dreaming all of their lives of the children they might welcome into their family, but it seems that that dream is fading as the hair begins to gray. Luke tells us that Elizabeth is barren- unable to grow a child in her womb. It is a cruel word used in the Bible to assign the blame on the woman unable to conceive. Elizabeth's predicament is not a new one. She is not fulfilling her expectations as a descendent of the priests in the line of Aaron...Aaron you will remember is the brother of Moses. All priestly descendents of the 24 sons of Aaron are fulfilling their priestly duties of doing the work of the Temple...offering incense, prayers and sacrifices along with pronouncing the blessings or benediction on God's faithful. Elizabeth and Zechariah are descendents of the priest, Aaron. Luke tells us that they are righteous, upright, and ethical people. They have fulfilled their duties, but not realized their dream.

They hoped for a child to carry on the family name. They hoped to bring new life into the world. It is at this time in their lives, when the hopes and dreams have dimmed, that in steps Gabriel, God's messenger.

Today our focus in our Advent readings at the beginning of the worship focuses us on HOPE. Hope is one of those lovely words that make it into the text of greeting cards. "I hope you feel better soon." Or a greeting in an email, "Hope all is well with you." Hope means that something is not quite what it can be, and there is possibility for things to be better. For HOPE to have a purpose, there has to be something amiss, something needing repair or restoration like a relationship, personal well-being, God's world. Hope connotes longing- a longing for something better.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were hope-ers. They had lived their lives faithfully before God. Their testimony and story, written down by Luke, is meant to bring truth to our world. In their world Herod the Great is ruling their people- not

always with justice or mercy. This is the same Herod who decides to kill all boy babies in Galilee after the birth of Jesus in case one among them is a threat to his power. It is into this particular time and place, where dreams and hopes for a child were running low, that God sends a messenger of hope. It makes sense then that this gospel was written down for a people brought low and in despair at the destruction of the Temple- the center of their faith life and the center of their community life. They needed a word of Hope. When all around them seemed to be destroyed, they needed to hear of the possibility of new life- a gift from God.

Now we know a bit about a world where things seem to be coming undone. The unraveling of the American Dream is something that we cannot begin to get our heads around. Our economic meltdown has done more than effect our cash flow, it unnerves something deeper- our sense of security and anxiety about our future. We have had a system that has worked for most of us for so long, that we cannot imagine how life is going to be as we face the realities of a changing world. Even in the face of that sense of loss or confusion, God speaks to us a word of hope.

In a week when we celebrate Thanksgiving, we remember our story. These were people who imagined a different way of life. This new place, new location, allowed them the freedom to worship God and to eek out a livelihood. When their world was unraveling, they went searching for a new way of life. When they began a new life here on North American soil, they did not just celebrate the fall harvest as had been their British tradition, they thanked God for the simple necessities of life. For you see, the forefathers and mothers, had a theological reason to celebrate. They had been rescued from dangers, sustained by the providential hand of God, and survived. It is that same place that we find Zechariah in the Temple today. The people of God were living in a new and strange world, one where the destruction of their Temple had altered their lives. Their world had been rocked.

That is what Advent is about. A world filled with darkness, a time of waiting, a time of longing. It is into that dark place, that the light of hope is born among us this season. And it starts with the truth being told. It begins with a priest hearing an unbelievable message that new life can be born. The truth is that God is mysteriously working when it seems like things cannot improve. The truth is that God can grow life in barren places among people unable to grow life themselves.

Zechariah has one dream fulfilled. He has been waiting a lifetime to serve as the priest in his section whose name is drawn to do the honors in the holy of holies this day. It is in the prayers and the incense that Zechariah gets the visit of a lifetime. Some would assume that Zechariah would be praying for him and Elizabeth to bear a child. But I imagine Zechariah as priest is blessing God and asking God's favor on the people of Israel. He may have been asking for deliverance from a difficult political climate and a turning again to God. I imagine he is focused on God. And then it happens. Gabriel appears scaring the holy underpants off of Zechariah. He did not really expect God to show up right then and there.

Do you expect God to show up?

When the world seems to have unraveled, do you expect God to show up?

In a barren place, where it looks like nothing can grow, would you ever expect new life to emerge?

Zechariah did not expect a visit from God, and he is overwhelmed with fear. He had so much on his mind that could have distracted him...thinking about the present situation of the world, how is 401K was doing, the recent act of violence at Fort Hood, the wars the sons and daughters of his neighbors were fighting, the strange droughts and floods effecting food supplies, and the new walls being built in his homeland causing the displacement of so many of his neighbors. No wonder Zechariah is overwhelmed and distracted with the world. I imagine he is praying for his people and for God's reign to be clear. How can this be?

When Gabriel pronounces that Elizabeth will bear a child and name him John, Zechariah is dumbstruck literally. The promise of a long-held hope coming true cannot be.

A son to bring them joy?

A son filled with the Holy Spirit helping people turn again towards God?

A son who will prepare the way for the coming Messiah?

How can this be? Zechariah asks. This is an answer to all his prayers...prayers for he and Elizabeth...an answer to the prayers for his people, his nation, his world which seems to have come undone.

In the face of their barrenness, what Zechariah lacks most of all is the imagination of hope for all this to be true. His lack of hope is his barrenness. But Luke wrote these things down so that we would know the truth. And the truth is that God is doing a new thing, just when it seems that it cannot be done. And that is when hope is born. Hope is born not when all is right with the world, but when the world looks as if it is coming undone.

And that is when Zechariah is struck dumb with his own disbelief-

¹⁹The 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.

²⁰But 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."

While Elizabeth is pregnant with John, Zechariah will have his own 9 months of waiting and transformation. And that transformation will happen when he is silent and listening, not talking.

How much talking we hear in our world today... we are overwhelmed with speech. Talk radio.... 24 hour “news”...which digresses out of the news category into spectacle... talking heads...talking preachers...so much talking.

I have always had an issue with talking. My brothers called me “Motor mouth” when I was little. And with five children my parents dreamed of peace and quiet. My parents did not know what the phrase “time out” was as a way of disciplining children, but they knew the practice of time out. If his daughter was overly energetic, loud, and getting on his nerves after a long day at work, my father knew how to address it. Make her sit still and quiet in the den for 10 minutes watching the evening news. There was no better torture for me as a child, than to watch people talking about the news events of the day. Being made to be quiet can still feel like a punishment to me, but other times it feels like a gift of God’s goodness.

The message we hear today is of a silent and dumbstruck priest hearing a pending pregnancy and a promise delivered as good news. At first I thought the good news was all about John being born and his purpose in God’s plan. But I think Zechariah’s lack of speaking is also Good News...because promise is born in the dark and quiet of Elizabeth’s womb and the dark and quiet waiting of a priest who almost let go of his dream. **It is not in speaking, but listening that hope can be born among us as well.**

So the good news, friends of God, and most excellent Theophilus, is that God gives us this season of preparing for new birth. It is our season of “Time Out” from all the talking. But we have to grow quiet ourselves and listen for the messengers that God sends our way which is hard when the whole world thinks that Christmas is already here. That is why Advent is so important to Christians, the Nativity of John and the Nativity of Jesus is worth preparing for...and I hope you receive the gift of quiet that Zechariah received.

I pray we find some quiet so that we can begin dreaming...begin to see new possibilities.

I pray that we can listen for the voice of an angel bringing good news.

I pray that we can look up from our work and notice a star in the distance sky and risk following that star to see where it leads.

I pray that when that new possibility is born among us again we can join our voices together and sing God's praises. After all, Zechariah cannot keep from singing when the promise comes true after the birth of John in Luke 1. I think if Luke were living today, he would love a good musical. For in the Scriptures that lie ahead for us, people burst into song along the way. In Luke 1:68-79, Zechariah celebrates the good news of the birth of John, the one coming to prepare the way for Jesus. Zechariah delivers the *Benedictus*, a "good word", of praise and thanksgiving.

Through these nativities of John and Jesus, hope is born, and God's plan of deliverance and salvation is made real. As this season of Advent prepares us all for Christ's coming, let us enjoy the silence, sealing our mouths shut, and listening for God's promise of hope and redemption, pregnant with possibility.

But when the time is right...may our lips be set free to sing God's praise as Zechariah did long ago...

(Hymn #602- Bill and Judy- *Benedictus, Canticle of Zechariah*.)

Aaronic Blessing

“The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”