

C Advent 4 12.23.18

Luke 1:57-80

Focus Statement: God can, and will, change us.

A bit of an aside before we begin, but I had a really interesting first hand experience with this text this week. I meet monthly with a group of colleagues, and one of them had surgery on his vocal chords this week. So when we gathered Thursday, he was completely unable to speak. He communicated with us through gestures and a text-to-talk app on his phone. The text-to-talk app, while helpful, was a slow process. And for reasons I don't know its already robotic voice had a British accent, which made it pretty hard to understand. So mostly, he just listened. And while my colleague is always an excellent listener with a gift for asking good questions, somehow in his silence I noticed that gift even more profoundly. I missed his quick wit and the ease of conversation, and felt the weight of the dialogue having to be carried by the two of us who still had voices, but I did really notice, and appreciate, his mostly silent presence in the space, interspersed with short, robotic British, comments that gently moved the conversation forward. Had I been the voiceless one, I may have simply not come. I'm really glad he had the wisdom to be there because voice or no voice, in this busy pre-Christmas week, I appreciated his calming presence.

Before we get into the meat of this Gospel reading, lets recap a little bit for anyone who wasn't here two weeks ago or who just needs a refresher on who Zechariah and Elizabeth were and why it was weird that Zechariah wasn't talking. We read earlier in Luke's Gospel that Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful followers of God. Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth a descendent of Aaron, both were described as "righteous before God, living blamelessly." But the couple had no children, and were both "getting on in years." One day,

Zechariah was given the privilege of entering the Temple to offer incense to the Lord. And while he was in the Temple, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him his prayers had been answered because Elizabeth was going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. And not just any son. This son was to be named John, a name which means “God has shown favor” or “God is gracious,” because, “he will be great in the sight of the Lord... even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people to Israel to the Lord... [and] make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Yet despite Zechariah’s righteousness, his response to this miraculous messenger, and message, was not joy but hesitation. “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years?” While one has to admit Zechariah’s very legitimate question, Gabriel had no time for such concerns. “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you... But now, since 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 occurred.” Zechariah came out of the Temple unable to speak and following the completion of his Temple service, they returned to their home in the Judean hill country where Elizabeth did become pregnant, as the angel had said.

All that happened nine months and eight days ago. We pick up the story after child has been born, Elizabeth’s relatives and neighbors have rejoiced at the birth just as the angel said they would, and the time has come, per Mosaic law, for the child to be named. By first century custom, the right to name a child belonged to the father because naming something was seen as a way to claim ownership over it. But since Zechariah was unable to speak,

their neighbors and relatives assumed they would name the boy after his father, thus labeling the child as belonging to Zechariah. But contrary to custom, Elizabeth spoke up and interjected, “No; he is to be called John.” One interesting aside in Luke’s narrative is that both John and Jesus were named not by their fathers, as per custom, but by their mothers. According to the direction of the Angel Gabriel, but still. Already in this subtle shift away from the cultural narrative of the father claiming naming rights, we see that God doing a new thing here, a thing that is shifting the power balance from its traditional centers to those whom have been marginalized. Watch that theme develop; we’ll see it for the next year we spend in Luke.

But this was still the first century, so despite Elizabeth’s assertion, the relatives and neighbors weren’t sure about choice. “‘None of your relatives has this name.’ Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.” To which Zechariah, by writing on a tablet, affirmed, “‘His name is John.’ And all of them were amazed.” But what’s really amazing is what happened next. For immediately after affirming the child’s name was to be John, Zechariah regained the ability to speak. And speak he did, praising God with this beautiful prophetic message, which is often called the Song of Zechariah or the Benedictus, after the first word in the Latin translation, “blessed.”

The Song of Zechariah is one of my favorite pieces of scripture. The Service of Morning Prayer in our hymnal has a song based on this passage, and in seminary, this service was the setting for our Tuesday chapel worship every week. So every Tuesday we would chant these beautiful words, “Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free. Who visits

and redeems us and grants us liberty. So have the prophets long declared that with a mighty arm, God shall turn back our enemies and those who wish us harm.” And like anything you do over and over, week after week, even six years out from seminary, I still carry that song, still find comfort and strength and hope in it.

What I find so powerful about Zechariah’s words is how assured and confident they are.

Like Mary’s Magnificat, Zechariah’s Benedictus speaks of the coming Savior, speaks of Jesus, in the past tense. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he has... redeemed his people. He has raised up a mighty savior... He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant.” Again that repetitive past tense, he has, he has, he has. It is only when Zechariah gets to the part of the song where he is speaking of the human realm, when he is speaking of his own son, that he switches to the future tense, to what for us and for his listeners would be the proper order. “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Also like Mary’s Magnificat, Zechariah’s song is full of references to Old Testament promises of God’s saving acts. The phrase “mighty savior” in the Greek literally translates to “horn of salvation,” an image the Psalmist used to talk about God’s power and might. There is reference to the covenants, the promises, God made to Abraham and to David, and now Jesus and John are the fulfillment of those covenants. References to dawn and light evoke God’s triumph over sin and death. There is so much hope and promise packed into these few brief verses; I could talk all day about it if you’d let me.

But this morning, at this time, what I find the most hopeful, the most powerful about the Song of Zechariah, is that Zechariah is the one who sang it. Because remember who Zechariah is, remember what just ended for him. Zechariah, a priest and righteous man, who'd lived blamelessly before God for his whole life, doubted the seemingly ridiculous claim of an angel who appeared to him in the Temple, and then was struck mute for nine months. This guy literally just got his voice back, is set in his ways, and, let's face it, is probably sleep-deprived because he's got an eight day old baby, and the first thing out of his mouth is this powerful song of praise. This seems out of character to me for a guy who encountered an angel in a Temple and was like, "I don't know if I should trust you, I'm pretty old."

What the Song of Zechariah shows us is the power of God to change us, to transform us, to make us capable of more than we know. In Zechariah's mind he was old, set in his ways, unable to do anything but the faithful, settled things he'd always done. But God had a new purpose, a new task, a new adventure, in mind for Zechariah, and in this song we see Zechariah embracing it. Yes it took him a while, but he got there eventually. Some of you may have heard one of my common quips about my relationship with God. Oftentimes when I'm facing a major choice or transition in life, it seems like I'll spend a great deal of time carefully explaining to God exactly what would be the best thing to happen, the best place for me to end up. And then God, with boundless compassion, will look at me and say, "awe, that's adorable that you put all that time into a plan. But no, I'm going to put you over here now," and there I go. It's how I ended up in Syracuse on internship. Not my first choice, but probably the place I learned the most. It's how I ended in California for my first

call, when I determinedly wanted to go back to DC. And it's how I ended up here; Battle Creek being a place I didn't even know existed, and thus couldn't imagine being.

The good news, dear friends in Christ, on this final Sunday in Advent, as we await the imminent arrival of the promised savior, is that in the birth, death, and resurrection, God has changed, has saved, the world. "Has" as in already has, past tense, our salvation is upon us. And we, much as we, like Zechariah, may not be able to understand or imagine it, are the people God is using to bring this revelation of God's love to light. We can and we will be the ones who bear this good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.