

C Advent 2 12.9.18

Luke 1:1-25

Focus Statement: God's promises will be fulfilled in new and unexpected ways.

So I'm going rouge this year and we're breaking away from the Revised Common Lectionary this year for Advent. The Revised Common Lectionary, FYI, is the order of readings we read every Sunday, readings which are shared by a lot of different churches, not just Lutheran, all over the world. And I love using the Revised Common Lectionary, one because it forces me to preach on texts that I wouldn't necessarily choose, as I've expressed in sermons before. And two, because I like the continuity of being in step with other Christians around the world, all of us reading the same texts in our own languages and contexts. Always feels a bit like Pentecost in that way.

But since we're in Luke this year, I decided it would be fun to break away from the Lectionary for a season and start this year of journeying with Luke by hearing the story told the way the writer wanted to tell it. So for the next three weeks, we are going to work our way through the first chapter of Luke. That way when Christmas Eve comes and we hear the beloved account of Jesus' birth in a stable, we'll know how we got there. So let us then, in the writer of Luke's own words, undertake the reading of this orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us.

The Gospel of Luke begins with what theologian R. Alan Culpepper, "a perfectly constructed prologue... [that is] both carefully worded and deliberately vague, simultaneously clarifying and obscuring." Which is neither here nor there, but the quote made me laugh when I read it, so I wanted to share it with you all. I like Culpepper's dry humor and he's the writer of

my favorite commentary on Luke, so we'll be spending a lot of time with him this year as well.

But for all it is "both carefully worded and vague," the prologue does lay out for us three important themes for what will follow. First, this orderly account is "of the events that have been fulfilled among us." Which means, as crazy as this claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, taking on human flesh and walking among us, the writer reminds us that this is not a new claim. God did not just show up on the scene in the person of Jesus and start redeeming humanity. God has never left God's people; God has been at this work of redemption for time immemorial. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise that Christ will come, and so we can wait with confidence that Christ will come again.

Second, this orderly account "was handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses." This means that this story isn't something we have to come to on our own; it is given to us by witnesses since the beginning. There are others who know it to be true, who have experienced its truth, and whose testimony we can trust. We are not alone in this story; we follow in well trodden footsteps.

And finally, this orderly account is so we "may know the truth." This phrase translated here as "know the truth" has this sense not only of intellectual understanding, but of something deeper, richer, and fuller than that. Luke is talking here about heart knowledge, of those truths beyond words that we hold in our bones. Luke tells this story, we read this story, because this is a story of knowing (point to heart). This story is meant for us to find

comfort, to find hope, to see how God keeps God's promises, to hear this corroborated through many witnesses, and through those witnesses and through these stories, to experience for ourselves God's redemptive love and power, so that we too become witnesses to that same truth for others. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of long-held promises, the presence of knowledgeable companions, and an assurance of God's trustworthiness. Keep those three things in mind as we journey through Luke's Gospel.

So we get past the prologue and the writer of Luke first introduces us not to Jesus, but to a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, whom Luke described as "righteous" and "blameless." Even their names evoke piety, Zechariah means "God has remembered" and Elizabeth something like "My God's oath." He is a priest and she, a descendent of Aaron, married one, these two are all the right things. Yet even with this stellar pedigree, they have no children. Now today not having kids is a totally acceptable life choice, but not so much in their time. And now they're old, too old to have kids. A righteous couple, past childbearing age, whose prayers for a child have thus far gone unanswered. There are echoes in this story of quite a few Old Testament characters, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and Rachel, Hannah, who's song of praise we'll read next week, just to name a few. Remember the prologue; this is not God's first time at the party.

Then the story goes on, one day, "when he was serving as priest... he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense." Now on one hand, this was a totally mundane action. Twice a day, a priest would enter into the sanctuary to make an incense offering to the Lord. "The whole assembly of the people" whom Luke described as "praying

outside” would have gathered daily for this ritual. But for Zechariah, to be chosen to be the priest who actually made the sacrifice would have been a once in a lifetime honor. This day marked the pinnacle of his lifetime of service. And then, right in the middle of his big moment, an angel of the Lord appeared and threw off everything. We don’t even know if Zechariah actually got to offer the incense or not, because from that point on all that matters is this angel, and Zechariah’s response to him. The angel’s interruption of this moment that is both sacred and mundane tells us something else important about the nature of God, and that is God shows up in the sacred, and the mundane, and for that matter, the sacredly mundane. And Zechariah, as faithful and as righteous as he was, and as long as he had been praying for just this very moment, to be in the Temple, to be in the presence of God, to be told he would have a child, when that event, the thing he had wanted and watched for and prayed for for so long, when it finally happens, his response was first terror and fear, followed immediately by doubt. “How will I know that this is so?” Which, I feel like the proof he’s looking for should be pretty easy to tell, he’ll know it when Elizabeth gets pregnant, but anyway. “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” Now Zechariah, a faithful and righteous priest, should have been well aware that age was not his biggest concern. Abraham and Sarah were like ninety-nine when they had Isaac. Again, Zechariah and Elizabeth, not God’s first rodeo with the miraculous birth thing. And I love the angel’s response. Zechariah says, “I am old,” and Gabriel responds, “I am Gabriel.” I’ll see your biological limitations, and raise you, because I’m an Angel of the Lord. I have come to inform you that God is about to act in a mighty way on the earth and in your life. Just like he did in the time of Abraham and Sarah, but also in a new way. For your child is not the start of a nation, your child is the pronouncer of

salvation. Because of John, the whole world will know that the one who will bring all the nations together, the one who will turn the world over, is coming into the world.

This story of Zechariah is a good one for us who gather here every Sunday, who are the faithful, because it reminds us that God shows up in our worship, that God transforms us in worship, but God does that in ways we often do not expect. Because Zechariah, in a lot of ways, is us. Yes he was a priest, and yes he was righteous and blameless, and that's a high bar. But he was one of a whole bunch of priests, and he wasn't one of the big powerful ones. The kind of priest he was is like the kind of people we are, well-meaning, faithful, long-standing folk going through the steps of a life of faith to the best we are able, over and over and over again. And yet it was to Zechariah and Elizabeth, in the middle of their everyday lives, that this pronouncement was given. So this Advent season, I invite you to be alert for those moments of God breaking into our world to do the same old thing, love us, forgive us, redeem us, but in a new way. Because the Old story of God's love never changes, but God is never through inventing new ways to demonstrate the same old, trusted love.

Amen.