



“Zechariah’s Story”

Luke 1:5-25

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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 as 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. 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. 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. 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 favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Luke 1:5-25

"I am stockpiling antibiotics for the apocalypse"—this is Anne Lamott talking, not me. I am not stockpiling antibiotics. Anne continues: "The news of late has captured the fever dream of modern life: everything exploding, burning, being shot, or crashing to the ground all around us. There is so much going on that flattens us that is huge, scary, or simply appalling. We're doomed, stunned, exhausted, and over caffeinated. Beauty is being destroyed, crushed by greed and cruel stupidity. It doesn't feel like the light is making a lot of progress. It feels like death by annoyance." (Anne Lamott, *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*, Riverhead: New York, 2018, 1-2).

Despair seems like an especially reasonable choice right now, but despair is not new, longing for hope is not new.

Picture an elderly couple that wants a child more than anything, but it does not seem meant to be. Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a baby. Most days Elizabeth prayed gentle prayers, but she prayed some angry prayers whenever a teenage girl got pregnant. Why didn't God give children to women who were not children themselves?

After a while, Zechariah stopped googling tiny basketball hoops. Elizabeth stopped collecting Dr. Seuss books. They stopped hanging around with the friends who could not stop talking about their children.

Now it is Zechariah's turn at the temple. The priests are divided into groups that serve two weeks each year. They pull a name out of a hat to decide which priest will enter the holy place and light the incense. There were as many as 18,000 priests, so the odds were worse than the lottery for Hamilton. There are not nearly enough turns to go around.

Zechariah is shaking as he enters the holy place for the first and only time. He begins to replace the incense on the seven-branched lamp stand. Zechariah is hoping that he will get through this without incident when an incident shows up. An angel appears and Zechariah starts really shaking.

The angel says, as angels often say, "Don't be afraid. God has heard your prayer, the one you hardly remember. Elizabeth is going to have a boy named John. You're going to love him. This child will be a joy, a blessing, a delight. He isn't going to drink. That's why they'll call him John the Baptist. He'll be drunk with the Spirit. He'll help others feel the Spirit, too."

Zechariah speaks before he thinks: "You're crazy. If you'd been around when Elizabeth went through menopause you wouldn't forget it. This doesn't happen to members of AARP."

Gabriel answers, "I'm just the messenger. This is God's idea. It's good news and you're not getting it. You should think about it for a while—nine months to be exact. You're not going to say a word until the doctor cuts the cord on this son you don't think is coming."

The people wonder what is taking so long. Zechariah considers hiding in the temple until they leave. But they are waiting for him to pronounce the benediction. When Zechariah eventually comes out, he has the worst case of laryngitis ever. He gestures like his team is losing at charades and the buzzer is about to go off. He is either an angel or a flamingo. How would he describe what he saw even if he could speak?

Elizabeth asks, “What if I like being married to a man who can’t talk?”

Zechariah is not the only one acting strange. Elizabeth hides for a while—to make sure it is true, to get used to it if it is. She needs nine months to get comfortable with the idea of a baby.

Mary—Elizabeth’s favorite niece—comes for a visit. They giggle like teenagers—which Mary is. Mary and Zechariah could have had an interesting conversation—both of them having been visited by Gabriel—but Zechariah can only wave.

In the 13th century, the Muslim poet Moslih Eddin Saadi said, “Nothing is so good for an ignorant person as silence.”

Zechariah becomes an expert in silence. He does not have to guess the proper response when Elizabeth complains about her swelling ankles.

He misses saying things like, “Hello,” “How are you?” and “I’d like fries with that.” He learns signs for “I’m hungry,” “I’ll be right back,” and “Do we have coffee?” When he gets frustrated his gestures look like “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.”

The sign he uses most frequently is a shrug that looks like “I don’t know” but actually means “It would take five minutes to explain so I’m going with I don’t know.”

He carries yellow post-its everywhere. When he wants to shout he writes in all caps. The teller at the bank is startled the first time he passes her a note.

He paints the guest room baby blue and puts safety plugs in the outlets. He wonders if Chuck E. Cheese gives a senior citizens’ discount. He thinks about Abraham and Sarah laughing at the news that a baby was on the way. Why didn’t Abraham lose his voice? He also thinks about Abraham and Isaac—and how they did not turn out much like Andy and Opie.

He wonders how many times he is going to hear, “Is that your grandson?” Zechariah will be losing races in the park before John turns ten. On the bright side, when it is time for college tuition, Zechariah will be long gone.

For three quarters of a year he is the perfect priest to hear confession. Who could be better at confidentiality than a priest who cannot speak? The months of silence become a gift, a time to hope.

Meister Eckhart said: “The language of God is silence.” We hear best when we do not say anything, when we hope and pray.

Zechariah is as incredulous at the birth of his son as he was incredulous at the angel who predicted it. The neighbors start calling the baby Zechariah. The name means “Yahweh has remembered again.” Zechariah seems like the perfect name.

At the christening—and I am calling it a christening even though it involves a scalpel—Elizabeth says, “His name is John.”

Not willing to let a new mother who is older than their own mothers make such an important decision they ask the father. Zechariah borrows a legal pad and writes, “His name is John.” And the cat lets go of Zechariah’s tongue.

You might think he would be careful with a voice that has not worked in so long, but Zechariah belts out the song he has been writing:

“We feel trapped, but God sets us free.

We feel alone, but God loves us.

We feel despair, but God brings hope.

God’s sunrise will break upon us,
shining on those in darkness.

God will show us the way,

one foot at a time,

down the path of hope.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth lived for years with the despair of not having a child of their own. They prayed for their own child, but God did not answer that prayer. Instead God gives Zechariah and Elizabeth forty weeks to understand that this is not their child. It is God's child.

We may not have a big Zechariah-in-the-temple-struck-mute-but-hears-the-voice-of-God epiphany, but if parents pay attention then they will be struck speechless by the obvious. The children with whom we have been entrusted are not ours. They are God's children.

Like John the Baptist born with a job description and Jesus at twelve in the temple, our children are to be about God's business. Our children are gifts from God and gifts to God. Parents are tempted to hold on too tightly.

Jonas Salk said: "Good parents give their children roots and wings. Roots to know where home is, and wings to fly away and exercise what's been taught them."

Roots are easier than wings. We find it hard to let them fly away to whatever awaits them. God may want our children to give away things we want them to keep. God may lead them to ideas with which we disagree. God may guide them to serve in ways that frighten us, but God's goodness is greater than ours.

God's response to our despair is the truth that all children are God's children. God's response to our despair is the truth that we are God's children. Even when we feel despair, God covers us with love. We are chips off God's block, God's sons, and God's daughters. Every one of us is a gift of the Spirit.

Anne Lamott again: "The truth is that we are beloved, even in our current condition, by (God); we have loved and been loved. We have also known the abyss of love lost to death or rejection, and that it somehow leads to new life. We have been redeemed and saved by love, even as a few times we have been nearly destroyed, and worse, seen our children nearly destroyed.

We are who we love. Love has bridged the high-rises of despair we were about to fall between. Love has been a penlight in the blackest, bleakest nights. Love has been a wild animal, a poultice, a dinghy, a coat. Love is why we have hope.” *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope.*

God is why we have hope, the hope of being God’s children.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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