12-3/4-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66 Characters of Christmas: Zechariah

In 2004, 2007 and 2012, the season of Advent took on a different meaning for me. While the church prepared for the advent, the arrival, the coming of Christ, Ken and I prepared for the arrival, the advent, the birth of our three children. Yes, God has a sense of humor, as all three children’s birthdays are within the same week in December.

Yet those times of advent waiting for our children gave me a new insight into the church’s advent season. The world around us has been rushing headlong into Christmas since at least Halloween. The church, however, is not yet ready to put the child in the manger. The church, during the season of Advent, invites us for four weeks prior to Christmas to pause and to ponder and to prepare for the coming of Christ, into the manger and into our lives.

Advent is a time of active waiting, a time of expectant waiting. Like a child watching out the window for Grandma and Grandpa’s car to arrive on Christmas morning. Like a teenage girl waiting for her prom date to arrive. Like parents waiting for the day their child is born. There is only so much one can do to prepare. Once the preparations are complete, then our focus turns to expectant waiting until the one we wait for arrives.

Our Scripture reading today is a story of advent waiting—as well as a promise fulfilled. Consider the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth as a prequel to the story of Mary and Joseph. It is not typically a story read during the month of December, yet it is a powerful story of advent.

There are more than 30 men named Zechariah in the Bible. Many are Levite priests. One is a prophet. The name means “God remembers” yet at this time in history Israel was beginning to feel forgotten by God. There had been no prophets, no angel visitations, no direct word from the Lord for over 400 years. Yet Israel never gave up hope that one day God’s promised Messiah would arrive.

The Zechariah we hear about today was a Temple priest, and his wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, the first priest of Israel, also known as Moses’ brother. So they came from faithful Jewish families. Elizabeth was an older relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. So they, too, were living under the reign of King Herod when Israel was under Roman occupation.

The Gospel of Luke proclaims that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations. They lived in strict obedience to the Law, never breaking any of the Ten Commandments. The fact that they are extremely faithful Jews is important to know, for the next fact we learn about them is that they had no children, for Elizabeth was barren, and now they were past their childbearing years.

They may not seem like a big deal to us today, yet it was for them. Barrenness was seen as a curse, as the result of sin. Childbearing was seen as a sign of God’s blessing. So although Zechariah and Elizabeth appeared blameless in their adherence to the Law, others would have looked at them and wondered what secret sin they hid.

Yet they hid nothing. She was barren, and they were righteous. By this time in their lives they would be resigned to the fact that they had no child, although deep in their hearts they would still harbor that prayer for a miracle.

Zechariah, as a faithful priest, also still held out hope that one day God would fulfill God’s promise of a long-awaited Savior, although after 400 years of silence that fulfillment appeared almost as far out of reach as a child in their old age.

Zechariah was one of around 18,000 priests that served the Temple in Jerusalem. They were divided into 24 divisions, and each division served for seven days twice a year. Think of it kind of like serving in the Reserves.

Certain jobs in the Temple were chosen by casting lots, believing that whoever was chosen by lot was actually chosen by God. One of the highest duties chosen by lot was the incense offering in the holy of holies. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The incense represented the prayers of the people, and when the incense burned, it indicated that God heard the people’s prayers. Only the priest chosen could enter the holy of holies, the place where God was thought to dwell with God’s people, and there were many stories passed down that told of dire consequences for priests were did not take this duty seriously or had not lived a blameless life. Such was the case for two of Aaron’s sons in Leviticus 10.

On this particular week, Zechariah was chosen for this once-in-a-lifetime honor of burning the incense. As the people prayed and waited outside, he entered the holy of holies, lit the incense, and offered a prayer on behalf of the people of Israel.

Then suddenly Zechariah realized he was no longer alone. An angel of the Lord stood before him. Naturally, he was terrified. To know that God had not spoken direct to the people in hundreds of years, and to suddenly realize that an angel of the Lord had chosen him to receive a message from God…he was overwhelmed with fear. Would he hear a word of judgement, a word of warning, or a word of hope? Would he live long enough to see Elizabeth’s face again?

Why did God choose that moment? Why did God choose him? I can imagine all of these questions, and many more, flitting through Zechariah’s mind.

Then the angel spoke, “Fear not.” “Fear not. Do not be afraid.”

How many times when God’s angels appear in Scripture do they have to say, fear not?

“Fear not. Don’t be afraid. Your prayers have been heard.”

Which prayer? First, the prayer for a miracle for he and his wife. “Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you.”

Yet again, God decides to make the impossible possible. Following in the footsteps of Sarah and Hannah, Elizabeth will give birth to a son even in her advanced age. Yet that is not all.

Second, his prayer for Israel will be fulfilled—beginning through his son John.

The angel declared: “Many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes.

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

John will be the precursor to the Messiah, the one to come and get the people ready to receive the Lord. He will be the one to call the people of Israel into a baptism of repentance for the forgiven of sins, so that they will be ready to receive the coming of Christ when he appears.

After 400 years, a word of hope is once again spoken, that God’s Messiah will appear and soon.

It will only be a few months later when the angel Gabriel once again appears, this time to a young maiden named Mary, with the word that she will be the one to bear the long-awaited Messiah. We will hear her story in a few weeks, spoken and sung.

Yet whereas Mary simply responds with a question of “how can this be”, never questioning that it will come to pass, Zechariah’s first response to the angel is to ask a question of doubt, “How can I be sure of this? How will I know that this is so?”

Zechariah has a brain blurt. He forgets his history at this time, forgetting that God worked the miracle of birth through Sarah and Hannah, who were both old and barren. Zechariah forgets his history, that when an angel speaks, it comes to pass. Zechariah forgets his faith, that God will do what God says he will do.

So Zechariah speaks out of his fear and doubt, “How will I know that what you say is true?”

And the angel responds, “I am Gabriel.” Gabriel, the archangel of God. “I stand in God’s presence.” I see God every day. “I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you.” This is God’s direct message to you, dear Zechariah, and you dare to question who I am or the message I bring?

Yet how often have others questioned God’s word or God’s messengers? Zechariah followed in the footsteps of Moses who questioned God when God spoke out of a burning bush that was not burnt up and Gideon who challenged God not once but twice, asking for a sign of fleece and water.

How often are we like Zechariah still today, that when God calls us to a specific ministry, a specific calling, or even to a deeper life of faith, a reorienting of priorities, we balk and say, “Are you sure about this God? How can I be sure?”

..Back in the 70’s there was a woman whose husband was an Air Force pilot. On his last leave before going overseas she reminded him to keep his trust in the Lord no matter how bad the situation became. Upon his safe return a year later, her first words to him were: "I told you that God wouldn’t let you down." He grinned back at her and said, "I know you did honey. But, I have to admit, He sure left me dangling there a couple of times." There are times, even in the lives of the most faithful Christians, when we get the feeling that God lets us dangle a little. At those times how often are we tempted to doubt God’s promises, tempted to struggle in our faith. --Jeff Strite “Believing to See” 12-01 sermoncentral.com, adapted

Gabriel didn’t reprimand Zechariah, yet did give him an unusual sign, certainly not one he was expecting. “What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

And not only was Zechariah struck dumb, the Greek word used here for dumb also means deaf.

So suddenly he was not only unable to speak, but also unable to hear.

What a unique sign, until it comes to pass. There is a promise of fulfillment, of speech and hearing returned, at the proper time—after John’s advent, following John’s arrival.

Zechariah exited the holy of holies, and immediately the crowd knew he had seen a vision, for he was unable to finish his duty and proclaim the Aaronic blessing on the people.

In due time, the first promise was fulfilled. God made the impossible possible. Elizabeth became pregnant. She celebrated with her relative Mary, and the baby within her womb leapt at their embrace. Elizabeth gave birth to a son, and the time came for him to be circumcised, according to Jewish custom, on the 8th day.

Also as was the custom of the day, neighbors gathered to celebrate with the new family. And I imagine it was a larger than usual crowd, given that Zechariah was still mute and the child was seen as a miracle baby.

The ritual preceded according to custom, until it was time to publicly name the child. Everyone expected him to be named for his father, Zechariah. Suddenly, however, Elizabeth spoke up, and emphatically proclaimed, “No, his name will be John.” John? No one in her immediate family was John. What kind of disservice was this to his father? The crowd began to grumble.

Then the priest turned to Zechariah, to ask for a final word on the naming of the child. And Zechariah wrote down, surprising everyone, “His name is John.” Not he will be called John.

Not name him John. Rather, he name IS John. His name is already John, meaning “God shows favor” or “God is gracious.”

At that moment, another promise was fulfilled. Zechariah’s ears were open and his tongue loosened, and all he could do was praise God. Over and over again, Zechariah offered his words and songs of praise to God, for God had done what God had promised to do.

While we did not read this morning Zechariah’s prayer written down by Luke, we did sing his prayer in our middle hymn, the Benedictus put to music in “Blessed Be the God of Israel.”

Zechariah’s praise was less about the birth of his son, and more about the fulfillment of God’s ultimate promise—the advent of God’s Savior. The ultimate salvation for the people of Israel.

Hope born anew.

Not all believed Zechariah. Few held his same level of hope. In fact, the crowd who witnessed his tongue unloosened most likely thought his mind had also come unhinged, as they were filled with fear and amazement—typical responses of doubt in the Gospel of Luke. Yet Zechariah was undeterred.

And I imagine John grew up always reminded of the miracle of his birth and the importance of his calling as one set apart and chosen by God to be the one to prepare the way for the Lord.

We heard John’s story last week, yet I wonder if he would have been half as faithful without Zechariah for a father and Elizabeth for a mother.

So what can we learn from Zechariah today? Never give up hope.

..When the world says, “Give up,” Hope whispers, “Try it one more time.”

—Author unknown. Homileticsonline.org

That is the essence of Advent waiting. Waiting expectantly for hope to become reality.

Maybe you are waiting for the hope of a new job, or the hope of love renewed, or the hope of a new opportunity to serve in ministry. Maybe you are clinging to the hope that tomorrow has to be better than today, living life one day at a time whether you are dealing with grief, with a toddler, or with healing from addiction.

The Israelites never gave up hope that God would speak again, although they had no prophetic word for over 400 years. The Israelites lived in hope time and again that God would do what God said he would do, even if they never lived to see the promise fulfilled.

Hope is the emotion of crisis. It is what keeps us living, moving, persevering, faithful.

Advent waiting is living in hope. And when we live in hope, we can believe in the fulfillment of the promises of God. Even when the world doubts these promises, even when the world doubts the existence of God, even when the world doubts how faith makes any difference, we can believe. We can live in hope, in faith, in love, believing that God is still God. And God’s promises have been and will continue to be fulfilled.

We can trust in the promises of God that declare that God knows us by name, loves us, and is present with us no matter what we face in life.

We can trust in the promises of God that declare Jesus is God’s Son, sent to save us from sin, and offer us new life in this world as well as for all eternity.

We can trust that when we share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion God’s grace reaches out to us, forgiving us and cleansing us, renewing us and uniting us.

We can trust that no matter where we find ourselves this Christmas, no matter how much we struggle to live what we believe, God is with us. In our moments of doubt and in our moments of conviction. In our moments of sorrow and in our moments of celebration. God is still with us.

Loving us, calling us, seeking us, forgiving us.

God is still God. And that is why we pause, ponder, and prepare for Christ in Advent. That is why we celebrate the birth of a baby in the manger, a baby that was a promise fulfilled, the gift of Emmanuel, God with us.

We have much to learn from Zechariah. May we now go forth trusting in God’s promises, relying on God’s grace, and living into the expectant waiting of Advent.

May it be so.