

December 5, 2021

Luke 1:57-80

Laying the Foundation

Sermon and Scripture

When I was a youth minister, I learned quickly that idle waiting time was dangerous, so I always had an activity that could be done while we waited on dinner. Members of the church volunteered to prepare and serve dinner to the very hungry teens, but sometimes things didn't go as planned and dinner wasn't quite ready when the teens were ready. So, to avoid hangry teens, sometimes we would have a competition called the Leaning Tower of Sweetness.

Each table group was given small marshmallows and toothpicks with the instructions to build the tallest freestanding tower they could before dinner was served. The winning table got to go through the food line first. The young people liked this activity for two reasons: they liked a good competition and the marshmallows served not only as important building blocks, but also as hors d'oeuvres.

Each time we played the game, one table would decide the best course of action was to just go straight up. Instead of building a nice wide foundation to support a tall tower, they would bank on getting ahead of their opponents quickly and dinner being served before their tower collapsed. It rarely worked. The teams that paid attention to their foundation almost always won.

A solid foundation isn't just crucial when it comes to architecture, our lives need a solid foundation if we are to fully become the people we were created to be. In today's text, John's father, Zechariah, gives us an example of how a parent's hopeful vision for a child lays a foundation for that child's whole life. This morning I would like us to think about the ways in which other people have done this for us, either as a child

or more recently as grown-ups, and how we can be foundation builders for others. This is Luke 1:57-80:

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Before I read what Zechariah said that day, I want to remind you that what makes this story incredible is that Zechariah was an elderly priest. He and his wife, Elizabeth did not have children and, due to their advanced age, had pretty much given up on that ever happening for them. Months before this, when the angel, Gabriel, came to Zechariah to tell him they would be having a child, understandably he was skeptical. His skepticism ruffled Gabriel's angel feathers. It was as if Gabriel took the angelic remote control, pointed it at Zechariah and pressed "mute." He would not speak again until the day of his child's naming and circumcision.

⁶⁷ Then Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all
who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the
wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

There are a couple of ways we can hear Zechariah’s words. We could certainly hear them as if they were a completely spontaneous off-the-cuff outburst from a man who hadn’t spoken in months. I know what that’s like, to have so much to say that when I have the opportunity it just sort of explodes out of me. Silence is hard for some of us. But truthfully, as someone who loves words, and loves choosing just the right words, I hear Zechariah’s words as if he had used the time while he was unable to speak to carefully craft what he would say if or when he could ever speak again. This week, I have enjoyed thinking of

Zechariah's words as if he said each word on purpose spending hours thinking, "What do I want the first words my child hears from me to be? What do I want to tell him about the world and about himself?"

What he crafted was a blessing. In it, first he blessed God, not for what God had done, but for what God would do, through his own child and through the unborn child Mary was carrying. Judaism, taught Zechariah the language of blessing. We read it in the Psalms and other poetic texts where it often parallels praise and gratitude expressed to God. Like in Psalm 145, "Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever." But the nature of blessing is more than praise which moves in only one direction, from human beings to God. Blessing is more flexible than that. People can bless people, God can bless people or things, and people can bless God. And, unlike praise, blessing often takes place before something happens or before something comes into being.

Zechariah's son, John, was born into a world which did not reflect the redemption and salvation of which Zechariah spoke. Though it these things had not come to be, confidently he proclaimed them as if he could see it all around, blessing God for the promise of a world to come, a world we know he would not have lived to see.

Even for the author of Luke's audience, more than a generation later, Zechariah's proclamation would have been understood as a statement of faith in God and not a report of reality. By then, the Romans had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple and the vision Jesus had cast among his followers, of a world made right, a world of peace, had still not come to be. Both the world of Jesus and John and the world of Luke's audience were more practiced at the brokenness of war than the healing of reconciliation. Yet, Zechariah blessed God for a world made right and the people in Luke's community, and the generations of people who have read these words since (including all of us), when we

are at our best, grab onto them with hope, believing peace is not only possible; it is certain.

Of course, as a baby, barely a week old, John wouldn't have understood any of what his father said that day. But the family who surrounded them heard what he said. That baby would prepare the way for the light of God to enter the world in a new way, to finally bring about the world they longed for, the world God longed for. That baby, like all babies, was born to bring hope and healing to a world that is broken, but it is also a world that holds more beauty than even our wildest imaginations can hold.

This week, I heard a young person who, like Zechariah, has a word for the little ones new to this 21st century world and I thought you would enjoy it as much as I did. In his "Letter to a Person on Their First Day Here," Kid President shares his language of blessing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5-EwrhsMzY>

"Even if hate has a bull horn, love is louder." Those might be words we should commit to memory. Lately, it seems like hate has had a bull horn, doesn't it? We can't turn on the news, sign on to social media, walk into our offices, schools, or even QT, and not be reminded of the division and hateful rhetoric that surrounds us. Vaccinations used to be scientific miracles, but now they divide us. We used to admire people who worked to protect children from disease and violence. Now we criticize them for wearing masks or for calling for responsible gun legislation. It's all so very loud.

But Kid President is right: love is louder. I heard it and saw it Friday at the Celebration of Life service for Emily Hood. First Christian Church was packed with people who talked about what it was like to love Emily and be loved by her. The family asked me to talk about Mark 12: 29-31

at the service. When asked by the scribes what the most important commandment is, ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” I think Jesus was trying to say that the foundation of our lives is supposed to be love.

There were a lot of beautiful words spoken at Emily’s service, but I was most affected by the very first person who came to the microphone to speak when I opened the mic to friends. All the way from the back of the sanctuary, a little boy, about 8 years old, bravely walked, by himself, to the lectern. He got to the microphone and as he started to speak, he just started to cry. All we could hear were his sobs. His love was loud. I was sad for him...and also so grateful that he had someone in his life he loved so loudly.

Whatever Emily did or was in this life, she laid a foundation that will live on through that little one and so many others. We are called to lay the foundation for the world God has promised. And I think what today’s text says is that, to do that, we have to believe it’s really going to come to be. Zechariah hoped it would be in his lifetime. Luke’s community hoped it would be in their lifetime. Our world is evidence that it was not. But we must believe it is coming.

And it is up to us to lay the foundation for it. And the foundation is LOVE. The world will never know true peace unless we start with love...loving God and loving each other.

So, be loud with your love. Make love LOUD on your social media accounts. Make love LOUD everywhere you go by sharing what you have, choosing words of encouragement instead of criticism, by including the ones who have been excluded, and by looking hard for

the image of God in person. It is there. Inside each one of us is planted the promise that the world will be made right and it's up to us to help God keep that promise.

In case I haven't told you this lately: I am so glad you are here. I am grateful for all the ways you continue to lay a foundation of love in this community and in my life.

You are loved...more than you know. Amen.