

Advent 1 2022-Order of Worship

Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80

Scripture

Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The 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. ²⁰But 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."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

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 his 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 his 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.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

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 child 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.

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
in his presence 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 his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break^[1] upon^[1] us,
79 to shine upon 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.

Sermon

Advent is known as the season of waiting. Raise your hand if you are good at waiting. I confess, I am not a great wait-er, which is probably why, when I talk about Advent, I tend to talk about it more in terms of a season of preparation. I'm a better preparer than I am a wait-er. Preparing says, "action," while waiting seems like, well, just waiting. Right away in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we learn they had been waiting a very long time for a child. In fact, they had been waiting so long we can imagine the days of preparation were long gone. When they were young, they must have prepared while they waited. Their home was ready, and their hearts were ready to receive a child. Zechariah and Elizabeth no longer prepared and if I had to guess, they were not really waiting any more either. They had accepted their reality. And then came the incredible promise of a child to be born to them.

Dr. Elisabeth Johnson, of Lutheran Institute of Theology, reminds us that if this plot sounds familiar, it should. It is very similar to the beginning of the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. From the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke, the author recalls this even earlier beginning, the beginning of the story of God's covenant with God's people. The story began when God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and go to the place that God would show them, and God promised them a child and many descendants.

From the beginning, the biblical narrative is one of God choosing unlikely people and unexpected ways to accomplish God's purposes. Both Abraham and Sarah laughed when they first heard the promise that they would have a son. With Sarah 90 years old and Abraham nearly 100, the promise seemed utterly absurd. They had long before given up hope of having children of their own. Despite Abraham and Sarah's skepticism and their attempts to take matters into their own hands, God's promise proved true. Sarah conceived in her old age and gave birth to a son, they named Isaac, which means in Hebrew, "he laughs."

Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth are rather unlikely candidates to play a crucial role in the fulfillment of God's promises.¹ Zechariah did not laugh at the angel, Gabriel, but he may as well have. He did question the truth of the angel's message, saying, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." I love Gabriel's response. I will paraphrase, "I am literally a messenger from God. I know what I'm talking about." Following that, the angel rendered Zechariah mute.

In Zechariah's defense, the text tells us he was overwhelmed by fear. In fact, the first words Gabriel said to him were, "Do not be afraid." That's what angels always say. It's funny to me that Zechariah, a priest, standing in the temple where the Israelites believed God resided, doubted this holy messenger. Between his fear and the fact that he had lost hope so long ago, even when hope was sitting right in front of him, he didn't recognize it. And Gabriel, the messenger of that hope, was not having it.

We tend to think angels of angels like they appear on a Hallmark card, cute, rosy cheeked cherub-y looking beings, certainly nothing to be afraid of. The description of angels in the Bible and the reaction of the people they encountered, did not indicate they were cute. There was a reason they said, "Do not be afraid." Their appearance scared the crap out of the ones they visited. Biblical angels were attention-getters to be sure and came with life-altering messages. I think "do not be afraid" was both practical ("don't be afraid" right now while you are quaking in your boots because I'm here) and prophetic ("don't be afraid" as you set out to fulfill what God is calling you to do and be).

Angels have been the object of many imaginations and have been used by authors and movie makers as guardians, teachers, and future tellers. In the biblical narrative they function as God's messengers. Right here, in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the other stories we will read this season, angels serve as "go-betweens" between the Holy and the humans.

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, Gabriel brought a message of hope, hope they hadn't felt for a very long time. That hope is precisely what the author of Luke wanted his original audience to feel as well. The people in the author's community were

¹ Johnson, Elisabeth, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/zechariahs-song-2/commentary-on-luke-15-13-14-25-57-80>, accessed 11/22/22.

tired of waiting too. God made a promise to God's people, not just for descendants, but for a land of their own. They had waited a long time for it to be fulfilled. The Israelites had been through wars, captivity, exile, and domination by foreign rulers, and in Luke's time they were being crushed and oppressed by the Romans. And still, they waited. They were losing hope that God's promise would ever be kept.

Any time an angel appears it symbolizes the breaking in of the Divine into ordinary life, which we will see in the coming weeks is an important theme in the Gospel of Luke. The appearance of an angel in the very first chapter signals that Luke's narrative is a story of divine events and yet it is set amid very ordinary people. The message here is that one person can, and does, make a difference no matter how insignificant their contribution seems. When Zechariah was finally able to speak again, he was a holy messenger too. He proclaimed God's mercy and intent to fulfill God's promise and the child they had been gifted would prepare the way for that to happen. God is calling us to become a people ready to be messengers of hope through our words and actions too. The message of Gabriel to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Luke's audience, and to us today is that even when the way forward seems impossible, hope is alive, even if it is just a spark of light faintly in the distance.

Like Gabriel and like Zechariah, we can and should be holy messengers, shining the light of hope into the darkness of fear that seems to be everywhere.

In other words, there are things we can do even when we don't know what the future holds, while we wait, while we wait to celebrate Christmas, and while we wait for the darkness to give way to light, for the world to be as God intended. I don't mean to make it sound easy, though. What I know about human beings, is that sometimes fear holds us back from living into our calling. In her book, *Fearless Living*, Rhonda Britton writes, "Fear is the gatekeeper of your comfort zone." Fear keeps us from stepping out of our own comfort and into the places that make us uncomfortable...places like our friend's grief, a family member's addiction, a co-worker's struggle to make ends meet, relationships that need repair. We are invited to move past our fear—past our comfort zones—to offer more hope at a time when everywhere we look, there seems to be something to be afraid of. Because the truth is, the ones who especially need to hear a message of hope are the ones who are right outside of our comfort zone, the ones whose

lives are messy and inconvenient. They need to hear the angel's message, "Do not be afraid."

Hope is a reminder that the way things are right now is not the way they will always be. Hope is listening to a grieving son's stories about his mom, even when those stories make us sad. Hope is slipping a \$100 into a desk drawer and when it's discovered, acting like you don't have any idea where it came from. Hope is leaving the door open for forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation. Hope is looking in the mirror and saying, "You are enough. You are not your trauma." We cannot mistake hope for some nebulous idea we just talk about at church. Hope is often the difference between living and dying.

We cannot fix the world in one week during Advent, but what we can do is offer ourselves as ordinary messengers of the extraordinary hope we have that people change and the world can and will change. In the words of poet Amanda Gorman, "There is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it." Be brave. Be hope. Amen.