Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

December 5, 2021

Luke 1:68-79

I downloaded some songs and a new audiobook to my phone the other day, which is still something that I’m amazed is even possible. Then I thought I’d better check to make sure I wasn’t nearing the capacity of my phone’s memory.

I’m not even close to running out of room.

Which is another thing that amazes me. My electronic devices have enough memory that I don’t realistically have to worry about running out of space.

The evangelists, on the other hand, had very limited space on scrolls for them to record their stories of Jesus’ life. So they only shared what they thought was necessary to record. Which means that there are few, if any, unnecessary details included.

It might seem like Luke could have left out the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, instead using that space for some teachings from Jesus. But he chose to include them in his story of Jesus. So Luke must have thought they were worthy of having their story told.

Based on his description of them, Zechariah and Elizabeth were good and faithful people. They were, Luke says, righteous before God and blameless. This is not meant to suggest to us that they were perfect people. Just that they were faithful Jews who were devoted to keeping the Law.

But there was a sorrow in their lives: they had no children.

No doubt both prayed often in their younger years, lifting up their hopes to God…hopes that, over time, became laments, perhaps questioning why God had not chosen to bless them with a child who would carry on the family line, who would care for them as they aged, bring them joy and happiness.

As they grew old together, their hopes dimmed. But their faith, their trust in God did not. Despite their disappointment that God did not respond to their prayers as they hoped, Zechariah continued to serve God at the temple. He and Elizabeth continued to practice their faith in their daily lives.

Elizabeth and Zechariah are far from the only people in Scripture to have lamented their lack of children, who would have longed for God to respond to their prayers.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reminds us that our laments are not a problem for God. In fact, I think God welcomes our laments, welcomes our honesty and our insistence that God remember us, attend to our prayers, make God’s presence known in our lives.

Zechariah was tending to his priestly duties at the temple on the day that he received a visit from the angel Gabriel.

Luke tells us that the angel delivered the news to Zechariah that his wife would have a son, whom they should name John, and that not only would his parents know joy and gladness, but many people would rejoice over John’s birth, because John would be great in the sight of the Lord.

It would be *their son* who would make the people ready for the coming of the Messiah. Who would give God’s people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

One can easily imagine Zechariah during all of this. Angels don’t start conversations with “Be not afraid” for no reason. Not only do they tend to appear suddenly and are, I suspect, rather scary looking, they *don’t* come with inconsequential things to tell the people they visit.

And when an angel arrives, delivering the kind of news that Zechariah received, it’s understandable that he would have trouble accepting it. It just seemed too good to be true.

Zechariah says, “How can this be? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.”

Poor, poor Zechariah. This just did not go well for him.

The angel says, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

My guess is that Gabriel figured that Zechariah, as a priest, should have known the Scriptures well enough to know God could make this kind of thing happen.

But Zechariah was old. He was old enough at this point that maybe he’d stopped actively hoping for a child. Maybe he’d worked through the disappointment in his laments to God, and had grown to accept that it wasn’t going to happen.

So to have this news dropped on him, in the manner that it happened…well, I think we can forgive him his hesitation. It just seemed too good to be true.

And yet, after 9 months of not being able to talk, Zechariah witnessed all these things. And when the Spirit unleashed his tongue, he burst forth in praise of God.

There’s a joke that these 9 months were a blessing for Elizabeth. Not only did she get the child she wanted, but she got 9 months of her husband not being able to speak.

The more I think about it, the more I think that those 9 months of not being able to talk were a blessing for Zechariah.

Because silence can be transformative. For Zechariah, 9 months of silence gave him the room to ponder the words of the angel, that God had heard their prayers and was not only sending them a son, but *that son* would be the one to prepare the way for the Messiah.

That’s a *lot* to process.

It’s no wonder Zechariah might have thought that what God promised was too good to be true.

We can think that, too, about the Gospel, about the good news of Christ. The idea that we’re forgiven, that we don’t have to try to earn God’s favor. That there’s nothing we can do to make God love us any less. It can seem too good to be true.

Luke shares the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth to help us when the good news seems too good to be true. When we’re afraid that we have done things so awful that God will stop loving us. When we fear that we are not good enough, that we don’t have enough faith. That our laments or our doubts are displeasing to God.

Sadly, the church on earth has done a lot to perpetuate this kind of thinking.

But the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reminds us that with God all things are possible. And high on the list of things God promises is our salvation and forgiveness.

So, to borrow from the angel: be not afraid.

God’s love for you is unending.

God’s love for you is unconditional.

God’s love for you, for humanity, for all of creation, is deeper and wider than we can possibly imagine.

Freed from our fear, we can, as Zechariah says, worship God all the days of our lives.