



Second Sunday of Advent

December 5, 2021

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude: "What Child Is This?"

Gathering

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE

Reader: We light this candle in hope and join Zechariah in proclaiming the good news of God.

Reader: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."
Luke 1:78-79

Reader: As we light the second Advent candle, Lord, teach us the way of peace.

Instrumental: "Dona Nobis Pacem" *Grant us Peace*

* CALL TO WORSHIP

Liturgist: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

All: **And this is the name by which he shall be called: The Lord is our righteousness.**
Jeremiah 23:5 adapted

* **All Singing:** 57 "All the Earth is Waiting"

* GOD'S GREETING

* GOD'S PEOPLE GREETING ONE ANOTHER

* **All Singing: 478 “Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding”**
Singing verses 1 – 4

Children ages 2–7 may come forward for a brief word and blessing before they leave for “God Loves Me” and “Children in Worship.”

CHILDREN’S BLESSING

Children: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also, with you.

Reconciliation

Liturgist: This is the voice of Malachi, an Old Testament prophet: See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple.

People: But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

Liturgist: For he is like a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.
Malachi 3:1, 2-3 adapted

* **All Singing: 58 “Prepare the Way of the Lord”**
Following along with the leader

Liturgist: Therefore, Zechariah’s son, John, went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins:

Choir: “Comfort, Comfort Ye My People” Bunjes

Comfort, comfort ye My people,
Speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
Comfort those who sit in darkness,
Mourning ’neath their sorrow’s load;
Speak ye to Jerusalem
Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell her that her sins I cover,
And her warfare now is over.

For the herald’s voice is crying
In the desert far and near,
Bidding all men to repentance,
Since the kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way!
Let the valleys rise to meet Him,
And the hills bow down to greet Him.

*Johann Olearius,
Tr. Catherine Winkworth*

Liturgist: We join the Apostle Paul in praying: I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

All: And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best...having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:3-5, 9-11 adapted

* **All Singing:** 908 “Christ Be Our Light”
Singing verses 1, 2, and 5

Proclamation

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

All: I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.
Psalm 30:5-6

Scripture: Luke 1:67-79

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Silence to Singing

* **All Singing:** 67 “Blessed Be the God of Israel”

Dedication

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

OFFERING

1. General Fund
2. Grace in Garfield Park

OFFERTORY “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

arr. Held, Eckstein, Schaffner

* **All Singing:** 478 “Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding”
Singing verse 5
**Honor, glory, might, dominion to the Father and the Son,
with the everliving Spirit while eternal ages run.**

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Sending

* BENEDICTION

* **All Singing:** 60 “Hark, the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes”
Singing verses 1, 3 and 4

Postlude: “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come”

arr. Young

Worship Leaders

Organist / Flutist /

Pianist:

Violinist:

Prelude Pianist:

Percussionist:

Minister:

Lynn Hollender

Francis Boerman-Cornell

Karis Dykstra

Clay Carlson

Roger Nelson

Advent:

Liturgist:

Prayer:

Choir Director:

Accompanist:

van den Brink Family

Wally Krakowsky

Bill Boerman-Cornell

David Baar

Beverly Baar

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Text: Luke 1: 67-79
Title: Silence to Singing
Date: 12.05.21
Roger Allen Nelson

It reads like a fable or a fairytale.
It reads like an archetypal story.
It reads like something that's a long way removed from contemporary life.
The story reads like this....

Before Mary's life is disrupted, and before Jesus is born, Zechariah and Elizabeth are pushed to center stage in Luke's gospel. Married, older, and both from priestly lineage, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that "in another time they might have been a clergy couple."

Chances are that they lived in the hill country around Jerusalem where Zechariah tended after a village synagogue. Think of him as a parish priest, a religious professional, a seasoned cleric who ran the corner god shop. Elizabeth tended after the home fires. As one preacher puts it:

Elizabeth's job was to have priestly children, only she didn't and in her day all the blame fell on her. She was barren, as good as dead, and Zechariah could have divorced her for it.

To our ears that sounds harsh and horrible.
To Luke, Zachariah, and Elizabeth it was a life-defining-value.

Like a minor league team getting to play in the big leagues – like the Rockford Rivets getting to play at Wrigley Field – Zechariah's division of priests was called once a year to serve in the temple in Jerusalem. It was a great honor. And on this occasion one priest was chosen by lot to enter the Holy of Holies to light incense at the altar – the smoke of which would carry the prayers of the people to heaven. The priest would then emerge from the inner-sanctuary to bless the worshipping congregation. As he had represented the people to God, he would, in turn, represent God to the people.

Well, our story starts when Zechariah wins the lottery and is selected to enter the Holy of Holies. This was a once in a lifetime experience. There were priests who never got this opportunity. This was Zechariah's lucky day.....

But while Zechariah is secluded in that sanctuary he has a vision – the visitation of an angel. Zechariah is rightly terrified. And the angel offers the most oft repeated commandment in scripture, the angel says, "Fear not."

At the collision of heaven and earth,
when we're afraid, when the fear of death, fear of meaninglessness, fear of chaos, fear of loss and loneliness overwhelm, when the Holy breaks through, again and again, God says, "Don't be afraid."

Don't be afraid.

The angel tells Zechariah that his prayers have been heard and that Elizabeth will give birth to a son who will cause many to rejoice, who won't be a drinker, and who — in utero — will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Eventually this child will be like Elijah, turning people toward one another in wisdom and righteousness in preparation for God's coming. What was there to be afraid of?

Truth be told, this news would terrify any expectant father, any priest, any one of us. Zechariah is overwhelmed with concerns and questions. He and Elizabeth had crossed-over the age of fertility; they'd all but given up hope.

By the way, at this point in the story, Zechariah seems totally normal.

Sure, he should have remembered the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Sure, he should have had more faith.

Sure, as a religious professional this should be right in his sweet spot.

But my guess is that he glanced down at his sandals to get grounded and then stammered out his questions. "How can I be sure of this? How can this be? In what world is this possible? We're both old...."

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

The commentaries call Zechariah's question the sin of disbelief, but I wonder about that. You might also call it a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness. He had waited a long time for something that was systematically denied him. He had gotten used to not being heard. How was he supposed to believe that this time would be any different?

The angel self-identifies as Gabriel, offers his *bona fides* that he came from the presence of God, and then, because Zechariah didn't believe this message.... Gabriel says that Zechariah will be mute until the birth of the baby.

God tells Zechariah not to be afraid and then shuts him up.

God takes away a preacher's voice.

God takes away his ability to speak.

Kathleen Norris says that Zechariah's muteness was a gift of grace, so that he wouldn't embarrass himself by talking and making matters worse.

Now, I love the idea of Zechariah going home to Elizabeth and trying to tell this story without speaking — that he might get her into bed and get busy making this baby. But, for nine months, silence. A professional talker and all he can do is listen.

Nine month is a long time to be silent. As Elizabeth changed, maybe Zechariah changed too. Maybe....

Maybe he knew there was nothing to fear.

Maybe he knew God to be merciful — knew deep in his bones that God came to the needy

Maybe he knew God's reach was beyond anything he'd imagined.

When Elizabeth finally delivered their baby boy you can imagine the clatter and commotion in the community. Their age was great and God's mercy was great – so great was the joy. Zechariah's face shone like the sun. Friends probably joked that given his silence the boy might have a chance to talk.

On the eighth day, when it came time to circumcise the boy, everyone assumed the baby's name would be "Zechariah." It was customary and the name meant, "The Lord remembers." That seemed appropriate. But Elizabeth suddenly spoke up,

No! He is to be called John.

Aunts and uncles, cousins and the neighbor kids, brothers and sisters all turned toward Zechariah in bewilderment. What were they to do now? Had Elizabeth lost her senses? This was to be Zechariah's crowning moment. But Zechariah motioned for a tablet and a stylus and he wrote, "His name is John." Which means, "God has been gracious."

And as a tear of joy fell for punctuation,
Zechariah tilted his head back,
closed his eyes,
cleared his throat,
and went from silence to singing:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people....

Then he turned toward his boy, laying there buck-naked, and he sang:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him. To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

My guess is there wasn't a dry eye in the room.
Who was going shut up the old guy now?

Dear friends, that's quite a story.
Let me tell you another story that's been on my mind and in my heart.

Kevin, at 12 years old, was a quiet and congenial student at Lavizzo Elementary School – a CPS school a block west of Roseland Christian Ministries. A likable kid, there was evidence that Kevin lived with some need at home because his teachers would regularly take his clothes to the washing machine on the school's third floor to wash them for the next day. But, on the Sunday afternoon before Thanksgiving, Kevin was gunned down while walking home. He died on the sidewalk.

Four days later, on Thanksgiving, his mother went to light a candle at the site where her son died and she was shot and killed in the same spot. A mother and a son murdered in cold blood on the streets of Roseland, just a block or so from RCM. Their deaths barely made a ripple.

Just another shooting death.

Just another poor kid.

Just two more lives that barely mattered....

I've been living with these two stories.

One reads like a fable and one reads like the third page of the daily news.

One is full of mystery and delight and one is numbing and full of despair.

One feels real and one feels like make believe.

How do these stories relate to one another? Do they have anything to say to one another? Does the truth of either story impact the other? Or, maybe better put, does the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth have anything to do with whatever story you're carrying this morning?

Let me offer this...

The Gospel of Luke proclaims that God comes.

God comes to an infertile old couple promising them a son who will prepare the way for the coming of God incarnate. And while the story may be archetypal, and some distance from life in this contemporary world, it still means that God comes.

We're not alone or abandoned. God has visited this cruel and broken world. And that means that the system is not closed, that the game is not over, that the metaphorical womb is not dead. That means that this story, our story, the stories that we carry are not over, closed, or dead.

I'm not relegating this gospel story to some bin of fables. That's not the point. Rather, I am suggesting that the coming of God is such a truth that even the story of Kevin and his mother remains open to the coming mercy, healing, and redemption of God. If God came to Zechariah, then surely God didn't abandon Kevin and his mother – even now.

Advent holds open the hope of God's coming. Rather than "a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness" we wait, even in silence, for God's coming into fearful hearts, broken relationships, and an anxious self-destructive world. Even on bloodied streets and in the face of unspeakable evil, God comes....

Zechariah closed his song after silence with this refrain.

...because of the tender mercy of our God, a mercy by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.