

DO NOT BE AFRAID, ZECHARIAH!

December 3, 2017

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Text: Luke 1:5-24, 57-66

SCRIPTURE

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With 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." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The 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. But 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." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not 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. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name" Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

Today, of course, is the first Sunday of Advent, the season in the church of waiting and expectation as we prepare for the coming of Christ. And in our culture anyway, for many of us when we go back to our earliest memories of Decembers gone by, we do recall it as a time of deep longing and eager anticipation. There were times of waiting and hopefulness, only, let's face it, we were not yearning for a Savior or redemption or world peace. No, we were eagerly waiting for those presents under the tree. We couldn't wait until that moment when it was time to rip away the wrapping paper and see if this was the year when we got what we really wanted for Christmas.

So it is easy to become rather cynical about it all. It would be great if during the month of December we would all be pious and holy, but we have been programmed from an early age to focus on candy canes and tinsel and this guy with a white beard and a red suit. And the truth is, often we end up disappointed. It never quite measures up to our expectations. When we were young we longed to receive the perfect gift. As adults we struggle to give the perfect gift. We are always hoping that this year things will be different. This year we will be ready in time. This year everything will be the way it should be. This year everyone will truly have a Merry Christmas, but it never seems to work out the way we had hoped.

Perhaps nothing better sums up this holiday cynicism than one of the all-time favorite holiday movies *A Christmas Story*. It is a great story of 9-year-old Ralphie Parker, who only wants one thing for Christmas: "an official Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model air rifle with a compass in the stock, and this thing which tells time." The plot revolves around Ralphie trying to get every adult in his life, from his mother to his teacher, and finally an obnoxious department store Santa to understand that this Red Ryder BB gun is the only thing that will make him happy. And what does everyone tell him? "You'll shoot your eye out."

While it is a great story with some hilarious scenes, the basic theme of this movie is really that those Christmases from our childhood that we thought were all so magical and wonderful, were just as messed up as they always are. You may think things will be different this year, but you will find yourself having to try on the pink bunny pajamas, the neighborhood dogs will devour the turkey, and even if you get exactly what you want... you do indeed shoot your eye out.

But when you stop and think about it, cynicism is actually a response to fear. We have been hurt, disappointed and frustrated so often that we refuse to be sucked in. On the inside we might be terrified that it is all going to happen again, so we stay cool and indifferent on the outside, resolved that we do not care and it doesn't matter one way or the other.

So perhaps it is interesting to note that when we read the scriptures surrounding the birth of our Savior the command "Do not be afraid," comes up again and again. Each time it comes up God is communicating directly to someone through a special messenger. Now granted, everything in the Bible indicates that angels are indeed frightening beings and nothing like the wispy, fairy-like images often seen in religious art. But God does indeed long to take away our fear and all our defensive responses. So for these Sundays in Advent, we will be looking at these references in the gospels and see how letting go of our fears will indeed prepare us for the coming of a miraculous baby, born so long ago in Bethlehem.

Our story for today is one that you may have heard about in Sunday School, but is not often the subject of sermons. It is not actually part of the lectionary cycle. That is probably because preachers want to be sure to talk about Mary and Joseph and so many other elements surrounding the birth of Jesus that they don't have time for poor old Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. But that is too bad because they are fascinating characters and key to the arrival of the Son of God into this world.

The text says that “Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” Now, that is very impressive because not even Mary and Joseph are described that way, “living blamelessly according to all the commandments.” So it is clear that they are good and faithful, doing everything they can to be what God wants them to be. Naturally you would expect God to bless decent people like this, but it says, “they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.”

Zechariah was a clergyman, a priest serving at the temple in Jerusalem. There were many who held this office. It is impossible to know how many, but probably there were hundreds like Zechariah who officiated at various ceremonies. However, each year at Passover, one priest was selected by lot for the honor of entering alone into an inner chamber of the temple called the Holy of Holies, and to burn incense as an act of worship before God. This year the lot fell to Zechariah.

As he was going about his duties in the Holy of Holies an angel appeared before him and said “Do not be afraid!” Now the message of the angel was absolutely fantastic, something specific for Zechariah and Elizabeth, something they had been hoping and dreaming about for years and years. The angel says, “Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness...” That is wonderful news, and you would think that Zechariah would be ecstatic. At long last, he is going to get what he wanted. He is going to be a daddy. A baby was coming, and they didn’t need to guess. It was going to be a boy and he was to be named John.

Now, just reading his words from the text it is hard to tell but it appears that Zechariah is far from enthusiastic. He responds, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” It is impossible to know exactly what he was feeling, but my suspicion is that Zechariah was very cynical about what the angel said. After all he had been frustrated so many times before. For years he and Elizabeth had hoped and prayed and waited and wondered only to be disappointed again and again. He wasn’t going to allow himself to be hurt once more. He wasn’t going to get his hopes up, and especially those of Elizabeth, only to have them all crushed once again. So I think he answers with a cynical, “Yeah, right, like that is going to happen. You have to do better than that, Lord. I am going to need a little more than a surprise visit from an angel to convince me. It is just too late now. Some things are beyond anything I can hope for.”

It would be like someone telling little Ralphie Parker in *A Christmas Story* that he is definitely getting his Red Ryder BB gun and he responds, “Yeah, right! And I suppose I am going to shoot my eye out, aren’t I?” The angel replies, “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. But 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.”

It is easy to assume that God was angry with Zechariah’s cynicism and doubt. Therefore God wanted to teach him a lesson and took away his ability to speak. After all, just imagine a preacher who is unable to say anything... That sounds like punishment to me, anyway. But I wonder if there might be another way of thinking about this. What if Zechariah’s silence was not a punishment, but rather a gift? What if what Zechariah needed most was not proof or convincing? What if the angel was not responding with anger, but with tenderness and compassion? What if God was giving Zechariah a chance to let go all of his hurt and disappointment and a chance to just sit back, to watch and listen to all that God is doing?

For at least nine months Zechariah had the opportunity to be quiet. Maybe he could not hear the good news the angel brought to him because there was too much noise going on in his life. Maybe he needed to stop for a while and listen. Maybe the only way to change a cynical tone of voice into a hopeful tone of voice is for there to be no voice. Maybe the only way to change a song of hurt into a song of joy is for there to be no song for a period of time. And maybe in his silence Zechariah realized once again just who he was.

As is often the case in Bible stories, names give an added dimension to what is going on. The name Zechariah in Hebrew means, “remembered by the Lord.” Perhaps Zechariah had come to think that God had forgotten him and Elizabeth. That is why he was so cynical. “I am not important,” he thinks. “I do not matter. God has bigger things to worry about than two sad and disappointed old folks. So I am not getting my hopes up.” But God says, “I have not forgotten. You will have a son. Many will rejoice at his birth, and you will name him John.” And the name John is a form of the Hebrew name Johanan, which means “The Lord is gracious or merciful.” Now in that culture, fathers were the ones who named their children. So when the baby is finally born and Zechariah is still silent, there is some discussion among the relatives about what his name should be. The family thinks Zechariah Junior is a perfectly good name. The Lord has remembered this couple and blessed them in a way they did not anticipate. But Elizabeth says no and Zechariah asks for something to write on. On a tablet he inscribes the words, “His name is John.” The Lord is gracious. I am remembered by the Lord, true, but there is more to it than that. The Lord is gracious and that is what really matters. His name is John! In that moment Zechariah understood fully who he was. And the text says, “Immediately his mouth was opened and he began to speak, praising God.” After nine months of silence, cynicism was transformed into praise.

It is so easy to be cynical this time of year, what with all the catalogues arriving in the mail trying to sell worthless junk, all the pressure to outdo each other, all the sappy sentimental stuff, all the jangling noise, all the family drama, not to mention all the time pressures. I could go on and on. It is easy to just give up and say it does not matter. Don’t get your hopes up and then you won’t be disappointed. It is never going to be what you wanted, so forget it. Let it go. But on Facebook this week, someone from this church posted this line, “Maybe it’s time to worry less about keeping Christ in Christmas and more about keeping Christ in Christians...” Hmm...

Maybe it is time to think about keeping Christ in Christians. There is so much that could be said about that, but I would tie it into our story of Zechariah. Maybe it is time to realize once again who we really are. Maybe it is time to shut up, be silent for a while, and listen to some very good news. We are remembered by the Lord and the Lord is gracious. That is why we don’t have to be afraid. That is why we can have hope. That is why that baby was born in Bethlehem so long ago. That is why that baby grew to be a man, died on a cross and rose again. That is why we carry his name. We belong to Christ and we are Christians. We are remembered by the Lord and the Lord is gracious. That is who we really are.

So let that be your focus this Advent season. Every time it starts to get to you; every time you roll your eyes and think it can’t get any worse; every time it feels like things are getting way too crazy; Stop! Take a deep breath and as you breathe in say to yourself “I am remembered by the Lord!” And breathe in God’s hope and peace. As you breathe out say “And the Lord is gracious!” Be silent and realize once again who you really are. A good way to start is by singing a sweet song about Emmanuel another wonderful name that means “God is with us.” Then after we sing, come to the table. We are silent in awe as we contemplate what God has done for us. We share the bread and the cup, and once again Christ is in us. Christ is back in Christians, and we realize who we really are. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.