

Calvary Presbyterian Church
Good News is for Sharing: Fear Not!
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Isaiah 11:1-10 and 12:2-6
Advent I – Nov. 27, 2016

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

⁵ *In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.* ⁶ *Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.* ⁷ *But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*

⁸ *Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,* ⁹ *he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.* ¹⁰ *And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

¹¹ *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.* ¹² *When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.* ¹³ *But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."* ¹⁴ *He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,* ¹⁵ *for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.* ¹⁶ *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.* ¹⁷ *And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

¹⁸ *Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

¹⁹ *The angel said to him, "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."* ²⁰ *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."*

²¹ *Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.* ²² *When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

²³ *When his time of service was completed, he returned home.* ²⁴ *After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.* ²⁵ *"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

The Birth of John the Baptist, v. 57-66

⁵⁷ *When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.* ⁵⁸ *Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.*

⁵⁹ *On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,* ⁶⁰ *but*

his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

(Then Zechariah sings!!!)

Faithfulness... and Fear

Disappointment/Doubt and Disbelief

Promise and Fulfillment

Silence...and Song

All of these are a part of this life changing narrative. Whose lives are changed by this encounter with Gabriel? Surely Zachariah's, Elizabeth's, yours and mine.

Faithfulness. Zachariah and Elizabeth were both part of the Tribe of Aaron, the priestly tribe. They are described by Luke as faithful, and devout. However, they live in the constant shadow of disappointment, for they have no children. For a Jewish woman in particular, this was not only a physical failing, but a disgrace for which one could be divorced. So, we also learn that Zachariah is a loving and honorable husband. He has remained faithful to Elizabeth as well as faithful to God.

Time has had its way and they are now past the age of childbearing. This fact places this couple squarely in an OT line of Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob, Rachel and Hannah—those who have suffered this indignity of infertility. Lacking detailed knowledge of human reproduction at the time, the female partner always got the credit or the blame.

Perhaps you'll recall that when post-menopausal Sarah overhears the news that she'll be producing a son, she laughs. She and Abraham laugh so hard there are tears running down their cheeks. Why do they laugh? Because God keeps promises. They laugh at the thought of a baby being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare picking up the tab. And they laugh because they are filled with Joy!

Fast-forward a thousand years...God is about to enter into time and space, into the lives of this couple, and into the lives of many--in some radical new ways. God is not done with this couple yet, not by a long shot!

Consider this...God had been silent for 400 hundred years. The prophets of old had fallen silent. That is not to say that God had been doing nothing. God had been waiting...preparing for the time to act once again in human history. John the Baptist, as he will be known, becomes the human link from the OT to the new age dawning with the birth of Jesus Christ. Four hundred years of silence. Most of us have difficulty with four minutes of silence, let alone 400 years of it! What are we to make of that?

Now God speaks through his messenger Gabriel, to Zach, in the context of worship. Given that all the male descendants of Aaron were priests, there was by this time, an overabundance of them. This meant that of the 24 divisions, each group actively served only two weeks during the year. Within his division, the lot falls to Zachariah. It is his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to offer incense in the Holy Place adjacent to the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple. In their order of worship, after the sacrifices are offered, Zachariah proceeds to the inner holy place with incense to burn, while the worshippers remain praying in the sanctuary. Zachariah is praying as he goes...this moment is the crowning achievement of his priestly service.

While fulfilling his duties--which no doubt he had rehearsed repeatedly, in anticipation of this day-- Zechariah has a life-changing encounter with Gabriel.

His initial reaction is fear. Surprise. Awe. He is startled by his presence, as well as by the angel's message.

The angel's message has four parts:

--Elizabeth will have a son, his name is to be John (v.13)

--This son will give his parents and many joy and delight (v.14)

--He will be raised in the Nazarite tradition (. 15)

--He will minister in the spirit of Elijah who was to herald the end time and prepare Israel for the Messiah (v.16-17)

Zechariah's response is not unlike our own when we have experienced disappointment or even disgrace (which was Elizabeths'). After all, put yourself in Zach's sandals...how would you react?

Elizabeth and Zach are quiet. Zach—because of disbelief his voice is muted/silenced for 9 months. Imagine that punishment, especially for a priest! But Elizabeth is also quiet, reflective, and shuts herself for 5 months. There is no known reason for this, but it might well have taken that long for her to truly believe and experience what it is to be pregnant...and to figure out a way to explain it to everyone, given the circumstances. (I don't really know!)