

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday in Advent
Matthew 11:2-10
December 16, 2018

Some of you know of the long-running radio variety show called *Prairie Home Companion* created and hosted by the legendary Garrison Keillor. He used to end his program by saying that all of the children of Lake Wobegon are above average. This fictitious place which became the setting for hundreds of memorable stories told by Keillor apparently was inhabited by little ones that were thought of by their parents as being a little better than others.

There's a little Lake Wobegon in all parents. We think of our children as being exceptional and that is alright. Yet, as our children grow, we discover that they are as ordinary as we are. They are people just like us. And we, as adults, are average but our children are not and I don't think it wrong to tell them that. No, I'm not saying we should lie to our kids... but it is our job as parents to recognize their abilities and special gifts and help nurture those gifts and help them to perfect them. Without a sense of who they are and what they can do they will not have the confidence to reach the goals they have set for themselves. We are careful to strike the right balance between setting goals, working to achieve them, and being consumed by them, blinded by them and then allow other very important parts of our life suffer as a result... like our spiritual life in Christ.

Now consider the old priest Zechariah, one of our "main players" during this Advent Season and within this year's Advent theme. Did he and Elizabeth conceive an exceptional child? Of course they did. God made John the Baptizer exceptional. His conception and birth was miraculous... born in Zechariah and Elizabeth's old age. He was called by Zechariah, his father, the "prophet of the Most High" after his birth. He was determined by God, announced by the angel, given a name that God gave him. Yet, Zechariah, standing there in the Holy Place of the Temple, a once in a lifetime duty, burning incense at the holy incense altar, he sees an angel of the Lord – Gabriel – and the angel announces this miraculous happening to him. Zechariah was made exceptional and so was his son.

Now let's fast forward three decades and talk about this "exceptional" child, John, who was out in the desert proclaiming the way of the Lord. At first glance, he didn't look exceptional. He looked down right ratty and unkempt. His hair would have been very long – he took the Nazarite vow – and he wore strange clothes like camel's hair and ate strange things like locusts. Perhaps this exceptional child has become the opposite of exceptional. He has become a blight on society – and unproductive bloke who does nothing more than cry out strange messages in the wilderness.

Yet there is usually one thing... one thing about holy priest like Zechariah and holy children grown to adults shouting out the call of repentance at the coming of the Messiah... there is one thing about them that we think must remain exceptional. That thing, to us, must be their faith. They must have an exceptional faith to be called to do what they are doing... to be chosen by God to announce the coming of the Lord. What exceptional faith they have. And, in turn, we might think, we will never have this kind of faith. As a matter of fact, more often than not, our faith is the very opposite of this strong faith. Our faith is weak, it struggles, it doubts. Only if we could have faith like these faithful men.

Faith like these men? Really? Remember Zechariah was made mute because of his "lack of faith." Truly, Zechariah the great priest... lacked faith. And don't forget about John the Baptizer, his son, in the text. He asks this question of Jesus, "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*"

Some will wonder if John asked this question for the sake of his disciples... so they could go and see for themselves that Jesus is really the one they were all waiting for. But John did not ask this for the sake of his disciples. He asked this question for his own sake. John was doubting. His faith was shaken. He

sits in prison not exactly knowing for sure if this is the way it is supposed to be. He wasn't sure if he got it right. He wanted to know for sure.

Beloved in the Lord, John's faith wavered while he was in prison. He had his moment of doubt. And it's okay for us to say this, and believe this, about the great forerunner of the Messiah. He was human, just like the rest of us. Human troubles beset his heart. Human emotions consumed him. He had an imperfect faith... the same kind of faith as you and me.

Does this sound like you... you who have an imperfect faith... you who has a weak faith? You are no different than the exceptional ones – who grow to be quite average – in their life in faith. And what I'm going to say next may surprise you. However, it is the truth. As the pastor of a congregation of people who might think they have a weak faith... or the weakest faith... it doesn't worry me. Martin Luther put it very well when he said that our failures in life and in faith, **“lies in our comprehension, it does not lie in Christ. It is like a man who has fallen into the middle of a stream. He catches a tree somehow to support himself above the water and be saved. So in the midst of sin, death, and anxieties, we too, lay hold on Christ with a weak faith. Yet this faith, tiny though it may be, still preserves us and rules over death and treads the devil and everything under foot.”** Beloved in the Lord, rejoice in knowing this fact: God does not save you because you have a strong faith. God saves you because of what Jesus did for you on the cross.

Our lack of faith shows who we are. We are sinners. We, as humans, will always have an imperfect faith. That imperfect faith often causes us to focus on others things for help and strength. It causes us to “not” rely on God. Repent of that, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. The Lord is with you, even when it seems as though He is so far away.

Remember how our Lord chose to reveal Himself. His coming was announced by sinners... who had their days of great doubt. His glory was shown perfect for you, not in those wonderful deeds of miracles, but rather in the one great work of Jesus on the cross. Death is the way of the Lord. It is through this death that He gives you life. So our eyes do not gaze toward all glory of Jesus when He is raising the dead and giving sight to the blind. Our salvation is not found in those outward signs. No, rather, our salvation is found solely in the work of Jesus on the cross. Suffering and death is what produces life. And we find God's grace in the midst of the trials and tribulations of life... Jesus is found there. And in this Advent Season... coming so close to Christmas now, we “rejoice” during this day of rejoicing during this penitential time at what our Lord came to do for us.

Think of it... He didn't break into this world and make His people happy. He didn't come in all might and power and privilege. There was nothing exceptional about this child. No, he was average... born to average parents... born in a “less than” average setting, among where the animals take their rest. The incarnation of our Lord was not exceptional... and neither was how He comes to you.

He comes in the Word, in water with the Word and in, with and under the bread and wine. This is how He comes... for exceptional children, for average adults, for sinners who have a weak faith. He's still our Lord, no matter what. He's still the Lord that loves us, who cares for us, and who saves us. And for those of us who have a weak faith... don't forget... our Savior's weakest time... the time He was on the cross... was actually His strongest for you. A strong saving work that saves sinners. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.