

Luke 3:1-6/Advent 2

Dec. 5, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ok – no guilt here. How many of you have been doing the Advent devotional?

I've really been enjoying it, and it's nice because it matches the lectionary, so this week it has been talking about Zechariah.

Does everyone know who Zechariah is? Yes? John the Baptist's father.

Now Zechariah was a Levite and Elizabeth was of the lineage of Aaron, Aaron being Moses' brother who started the line of the high priests. So, we could say that they were like the uber-religious couple of the time.

They were of a long line of priests and very active in Temple life. But, they were old and had no children. God didn't gift them with a child at all – not a daughter and not a son to carry on the line of priests. Nada. No children for them.

Now, this is not an unusual story in the Bible, right? A lot of women have no children until they are old, because God has a special plan for that child. The most famous example would be Sarah. Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth to Isaac. That was a long time to wait. God had promised Abraham a son to continue his line so that God would be known in the world when he was a young man.

Sarah was the one who gave up and gave her slave to Abe so he would have a child, which he did. His name was Ishmael, but he wasn't the chosen one. About 15 years later, Abraham and Sarah had their own son together, Isaac, who was born when Abe was over 100 years old.

Anyway, Zechariah, being an uber-religious man, from a long line of priests, should have known this story, but evidently he didn't think it could happen to him.

Maybe he didn't feel important enough. Maybe he was bitter because he was righteous and had no children. Maybe he just wasn't feeling well that day.

When Gabe appeared to him and told him he would have a son, Zechariah was "meh" about the whole thing. He didn't celebrate. He didn't give thanks. He just said, "Yeah. Right. Prove it!"

And here is the most interesting thing about Zechariah's story. God didn't care that Zechariah didn't think it could happen to him. God didn't care that Zechariah doubted. God didn't care that he needed proof. Elizabeth was going to give birth to John whether Zechariah liked it or not.

And that always makes me think about Mary, who had a totally different response than Zechariah. You may remember that Mary said – Let it be to me according to your will. And she gave thanks and celebrated for all of Israel.

So, does God need us to believe God in order for God to use us? Does God need our permission? Will God look for someone else if we say "meh? I don't think so."

I'd say based on Zechariah the answer is no. God doesn't care if we're game or not. God's going to use us, which may be scary, but in the end Zechariah rejoices. And I've seen this happen with pastors.

There are two different kinds of pastors in the world. There are those who came out of the womb saying – I'm going to be a pastor! And those who say, yeah, I don't think so, but who end up being called anyway. I'm in the latter group myself, but that doesn't mean I'm not happy to have the call. This is definitely who I am now, even if it wasn't who I ever thought I would be.

So after many many many many years of having no children, Zechariah thought – I'll never be a father. And maybe at this point he's just too tired to even think of having a baby running around.

But, it doesn't matter. God uses Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth anyway. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was really excited.

And my favorite thing about this story of Zechariah is that when he tells the angel, “I don’t think so,” the angel says – Eh! You can’t talk anymore. The angel took Zechariah’s voice away! At least until John was born.

How about that?!

The angel, who served as God’s voice, takes Zechariah’s doubting voice away. Maybe he just needed to shake Zechariah up so that he would know he was really in the presence of God’s messenger and he really was going to have a baby. I guess that could be the proof he was looking for. God is in the silence.

So, for 9 months, Zechariah couldn’t say a thing, but just imagine all of the things he heard. When you stop talking, you hear all sorts of things.

So, Zechariah is actually an Advent example for us. Advent is a time of preparing the way of the Lord, like John, Zechariah’s son, but sometimes we need to be silent before we can talk. Sometimes we need to listen before we can have anything to say. And so Advent is a time to be quiet and listen.

So, what are the voices around you saying? Who is crying out in pain? Who is crying out in joy? What does that mean as we await the coming of the Lord?

Everyone around Zechariah was asking – what does his silence mean? Sometimes no answer is the best answer.

For four hundred years, God had been silent. Zechariah was the first one to hear anything from God since the prophet Malachi, and now Zechariah is silent. That is until John is born, and it’s not until he writes down that John’s name is John that he is able to speak again, and when he speaks we get what is our psalm for today.

In Luke 1:76, Zechariah addresses John – you child shall be the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way. And then when John is 30ish years old, he takes on the role that he has been called into – to prepare the way of the Lord.

John uses his voice, the voice God gives him, to bring the good news that the Lord is coming. The Lord has heard their cries and God is coming!

And so the new prophet quotes the prophet of old. He is the one crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way, to make Jesus' paths straight, flat, wide, and smooth. To take away all barriers.

With the baptism of forgiveness for those who have repented of their sin, John removes every obstacle. There is nothing that can keep God from coming to those who have turned their faces back to God, especially because God is standing right there waiting for them to turn, and encouraging it.

So, don't doubt, but believe and trust in God. And if you are doubting, that's ok. Stay silent and listen until you are called to speak. And if you are called to speak, shout out the good news that God is near so that those who are silent can hear the good news.

This is the season of Advent and we are preparing the way for those who do not know God's great love for them. We cry out for those who are stuck in guilt and shame, so that they will know they are already beloved. God forgives everyone who repents, and God gifts us with the Holy Spirit so that we can be strengthened to take up the mantle of clearing the way for God to come into every life.

There is a time to be silent, so that we can listen. And, there is a time to speak, so that all obstacles between us and God can be removed. It's a conversation – a three way conversation between us, God, and others. Sometime we listen to the other, sometimes we listen to God, and sometimes we are called to speak. The trick is knowing the difference. And so we pray for guidance.

Today begins the second week of Advent. Here in the Church the light is growing as the darkness grows deeper outside. This is a reminder for us – that the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness did not overcome it!

That's what we proclaim in this season of hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.