

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

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."

Canticle of Zechariah: Luke 1:68-79

The birth of a child is enough to make a father break into song. As I remember it, that is about right. At the end of a long labor, mom is pretty exhausted. She is of course happy, but there is work to be done, and a hungry child to be fed. But even for the most involved of dads (even those dads who have spent nine months saying *we* are pregnant) those hours and even days after a child’s birth are a time of introspection and singing—regardless of whether or not the song is ready for prime time.

For Zechariah, however, this is all even more poignant because he hasn’t said a word for nine months! Or so the story goes...

In the days of King Herod, Luke’s Gospel tells us, there was a priest named Zechariah. His wife, Elizabeth, was a p.k. (priest’s kid.) They were both righteous people, both faithful people. *But...*

There is always a “but,” isn’t there? Life isn’t easy, and the Bible is about life—not a fairy tale. These are good people, people committed to God. *But...* they are getting “advanced in years” (which is the Bible’s politically correct way of saying they are old!) and they have no child...because Elizabeth was barren.

Those words are a bit like fingernails scraping on a chalkboard, even two thousand years after they were first written by Luke. Luke is said to have been a physician; that’s not a certainty but let’s suppose for a moment he was. Even so, he had only the best science of his day to work with. Being a writer of a gospel doesn’t make one omniscient or able to look into a future where microscopes reveal new truths about how babies are made. Luke assumed that if there was a problem it must be the woman’s “fault.” Or worse, that God was somehow perhaps punishing the woman. There were no fertility clinics, no *in vitro* fertilizations. If you couldn’t get pregnant there was not only sadness, but also some measure of blame and shame and guilt thrown in for good measure. The way Elizabeth describes it in retrospect is that she has “endured disgrace” among her people. (Lk. 1:25)

Most people who sit down to read Luke’s Gospel, however, have some experience with the God of the Bible. We don’t read Luke in isolation from all that came before it; it’s not the beginning of a story but the continuation of a long story that began way back in Genesis. Abraham and Sarah were promised descendents numbering as the stars. *But...* as they became “advanced in years” they still had no heir. Rebekkah, Rachel, Hannah—all of these women were thought to be “barren.” With God, however, *all things are possible*. Not easy; but possible.

And so like Sarah and Rebekkah and Rachel and Hannah before her, just thirteen verses into the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel Elizabeth learns that she is pregnant. God is at it again: bringing forth life in what is perceived as a barren desert. The angel Gabriel comes to tell Zechariah the news and even though he is a priest and a righteous man he is dumbfounded: these things, he had thought, only happened in the Old Testament—a *long, long* time ago. In fact Zechariah is so freaked out he becomes speechless. *Literally*. For nine months this priest doesn’t speak a word. (Now that may well be the answer to his wife’s prayers, or perhaps his congregation’s prayers—but that’s another sermon!)

In any event, the pregnancy progresses and as you well remember, a few months later Elizabeth’s cousin—Mary—comes to call and to share the news that she, too, is pregnant. And the child in Elizabeth’s tummy kicks her with joy. The lives of these two women and their two sons will be inextricably linked as the story of God’s work in the world continues to unfold.

And so the child is born—the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah, I mean. (We have to wait a couple more weeks to celebrate the birth of the *other* child! Be patient!) Zechariah still hasn’t spoken a word. The eighth day comes which is the day when little Jewish boys are circumcised. And when they are circumcised they also get a name.

There is, of course, only one name for such a long-awaited child—a child born to a woman who was thought to have been barren. There is only one name by which to call him and that is to give him his father’s name. His aunts and uncles can call him “little Zecky.” But his mother says, “he is to be called John.” The friends and family are shocked and they turn to Zechariah for help but he still can’t speak. He writes it down, though: “*His name is John.*”

And *immediately*, Luke tells us, his tongue was loosed. He could speak again! And what do you think he says? Well we heard it already, we sang it along with him—this father’s song. His first word is to thank God for this child. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...”

And then he sings—or rather prays—because as you all know he who sings prays twice. Notice that his prayer has a past, present, and future tense to it. He blesses God, who has *looked* favorably on his people, God who has *redeemed* his people, God who has *raised up* a savior, God who has *spoken* through the prophets, God who has *shown mercy* and *remembered* the covenant and *rescued* his people in days gone by...

But all that good stuff is no longer confined to some distant past. That is the great insight of Zechariah and of people of faith in every age who encounter the living God who refuses to become a mere memory. Zechariah prays that he might respond to God by serving God this day,

in holiness and righteousness. The gift of his son kindles in him an experience of the holy God and Zechariah says, “Lord, I am able—send me.”

And then old Zechariah looks at the face of his little boy, John, and he sees a future—not just for himself, not just for his son, but for the life of the world:

*you will be called a prophet,
and you will prepare the way,
and the dawn from on high will break upon us.*

On this second Sunday of Advent we are so used to hearing the Baptist’s cry at the Jordan River. He preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He is out there like a prophet of old, like Isaiah had done so many years before him. He is out there preparing the way of the Lord for the One who comes after him, the one whose sandals he says he isn’t worthy to untie. The One by whom and with whom and through whom all things are made new—and the dawn from on high does indeed break.

But behind this wild-haired man eating locusts and dressed in odd clothes there is the love of his parents—there is this old priestly family. There is his father’s song.

It seems to me that it would completely and utterly miss the point if we heard this story only in the past tense—as if God did this amazing thing through the birth of John the Baptist and then the birth of Jesus but that was it—then God retired. I think that if we dare to make this prayer our own then we begin to, ourselves, discover that our faith has a past, present, and future component to it. And I think that is at the heart of what Advent is for.

What are the songs we sing to and for the children of this parish? It doesn’t really matter much if they are your own, biologically—if they call you mom or dad or grandma or grandpa. We are all family in Christ. We mentor one another from one generation to the next. So as we look in the faces of the children of this parish who have been baptized here in the past year or so, what is the prayer we pray for them? And how are we living it out with our first graders and our confirmation class and our college kids?

Our prayer, of course, is the Baptismal Covenant. It is in Holy Baptism that we give our children back to God in love. That prayer, too, has a past, present, and future tense. And we know—even in Advent—that *Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again*. We organize ourselves around that sacred mystery—and the love of God made manifest to us especially when we baptize or share the Eucharist together.

All the rest is gravy. This is the very core of who we are called to be: a people who remember the God who has redeemed us, a people called to serve God without fear, a people preparing the way and sharing the good news with the world. We have been entrusted to share the love of Jesus with our children and grandchildren, for the sake of the world. It’s a song we need to sing at the top of our lungs!

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