

Luke 1:5-23

Zechariah

2nd Advent (year C); Dec 5, 2021

The second and third Sundays of Advent always reference John the Baptist within the prescribed Lectionary readings—his preaching and promises that One is coming after him. With John's father Zechariah only mentioned in Luke's gospel, I thought it an opportunity to preach on John the Baptist out of the lens of his father. With that I offer an interpretation of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist.

My name is Zechariah and this is the season to tell stories, so I will share a bit of my life with you this day. Elizabeth, my wife, and I are people of faith and conviction. We both come from priestly families committed to God and the people of God. We are grateful to be married to each other, but we were parents without a child for a very long time and it was a sore spot. I will get to that. It makes sense to share my story in three movements: my family history, my life with Elizabeth, and the child.

Part 1: Zechariah

I am not certain why my parents named me Zechariah. I am not sure they even know why, but that is what they did. As I look back over the course of my life now, it makes perfect sense—almost like God's leading.

Zechariah of our Hebrew scriptures was a prophet; one of 12 we refer to as the minor prophets. If this were my parent's sole criteria for choosing a name, I could have been a Habakkuk or an Obadiah or even a Nahum—Zechariah really isn't that bad. As you probably remember, the prophet Zechariah was vitally concerned with rebuilding the temple, the spiritual health of the people, and a trust that a Messiah would bring them deliverance. Over the course of several months that Zechariah had a series of visions to encourage the people in a deeper trust of God.

You may not know this, but I too had a vision and it took place in the temple. Visions and temples; not unlike Zechariah the first. But my family is actually of the priestly caste, not the prophetic side of ministry for God. My turn came up for service in the temple, a high honour I might add, and I was chosen by lot to offer the incense all on my own the holy of holies. I was alone. An angel, a messenger of God, appeared. I was shocked and terrified. And then this celestial being began talking.

He said that Elizabeth and I would have a son. That this son would turn the hearts of parents to their children. That the disobedient would be given wisdom, that he would prepare people to meet the Lord.

This message was nearly identical to the concerns of my namesake from the Hebrew scriptures. Render true judgement, the prophet said. Show kindness and mercy, the prophet said. Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger or the

poor, the prophet said. Do not utter false oaths, the prophet said. Return to me and I will return to you, the prophet said.

One of our learned scholars of the texts, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel (mid 2nd century CE), once wrote that the world is established on three things: justice, truth and peace. All three, he noted, were found in the book of Zechariah (8:16): “Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgements that are true; make for peace. Rabbi Simeon then went on to say “The three are, in fact, one. For when justice is exercised, truth is attained, and peace is achieved” (Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 196; see also Mishna Avot 1:18). The angel was suggesting what the boy, our boy, would do is much what Zechariah of the Hebrew scriptures had done.

Zechariah the first wrote of a king riding on a donkey, of God’s return to Zion through a Messiah, of Jerusalem being restored. This is who I was named after. It certainly didn’t fit with the religious maintenance of my profession. Maybe the values of Zechariah were part of what I was called to impart to the boy. I will return to this drama shortly, but I need to bring Elizabeth into the story.¹

Part 2: Life with Elizabeth

Elizabeth, herself, is of a priestly lineage. She is a descendent of Aaron who many claim was the first priest serving God (see Exodus 4:14 and references throughout Exodus).² Aaron, a prophet before Pharaoh. Aaron, a brother of Moses and co-leader who brought people out of slavery. Aaron, whose descendants became known as the Levites and were given care of God’s holy sites. In hindsight the boy got as much of his spunk from his mother’s side of the family as from mine.

Elizabeth seemed to fit in perfectly with my line of work. It seemed a match made in heaven. And those early years were good, but we had no children. We lived blamelessly according to the commandments and regulations of the Lord, and still we had no children. We prayed earnestly for a child, and still we had no children. We were really getting on in years, and still we had no children.

The feeling generated by these years of ardent service and righteous living and unanswered prayer are not easy to talk about.

- At times I was bitter towards a God who hears prayers but doesn’t answer.
- At times I was angry with the community who wondered aloud about the reasons Elizabeth and I were barren.
- At times I was tormented by the sounds of playing children.
- At times I felt as if I was playacting my role as a priest.

¹ David J. Zucker, *Israel’s Prophets: And Introduction for Christians and Jews* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), pp 157—161.

² *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 3.

With these sentiments swirling within me I was not in a good place to hear Gabriel's message. Years of heartache and unfulfilled expectations jaded me to what the angel was saying. So I put it out there, "how will I know that this is so?"

Bang! The angel Gabriel lost it. Gabriel leveled those smoking angel eyes at me and said something like the following: "Look I have been sent to you to speak good news to you. And because you do not believe my words, you will not speak for a while." And so I went silent for almost nine months.

I should have remembered the visions of prophet Zechariah—visions of hope and renewal. I should have remembered Sarah and Abraham who had a child long after it seemed possible, spoken by the word of an angel. I should have remembered Manoah and his wife who too were barren and conceived a deliverer, spoken by the word of an angel. I should have remembered the Shunammite woman and her old husband who had no child and yet conceived, spoken by the word of a prophet. I suppose I was not in a good place to listen well or remember the stories of our sacred texts.

A word of wisdom to those listening, if one is going to doubt the words of God's angels, it is best to do so from an open and accepting heart. I say this because a relative of Elizabeth (Mary the mother of Jesus) also found a word from angel Gabriel difficult to take in and make sense of. And yet she didn't lose her voice. One difference in Gabriel's response to us maybe had to do with the cynicism and bitterness that had built up for me all those years of waiting. Mary was young, and I would guess her heart was more accepting of the possibilities than mine. Or maybe she remembered our stories more clearly.

Those months of silence were probably good for me and almost certainly better for Elizabeth. At work they took me off the preaching schedule. At home I had lost my ability to complain about things not being fair. We feel hurt by God, by the temple, by the community—why, though, did I cling to these resentments? Why do any of us? I had time to consider these questions. Maybe I needed my own period of gestation to process such matters. In the end I do not doubt the silence made me a better father. And this takes me to my final section for today.

Part 3: My life as John's father

Elizabeth and I were so grateful for John when he was born. Some of the dreams we had for our lives were being realized. Between Gabriel's message to me and to Mary we had renewed hopes for the worshipping communities we served. And I had my voice back! I was so overjoyed with the prospects and filled with God's Spirit that I burst out with words that truly came from beyond.

That this child would serve in righteousness and holiness, that he would be called a prophet of the Most High; that this child would prepare the way of the Lord; that this child would offer knowledge of salvation and forgiveness of sins.

Elizabeth and I offered the best of our family lines and faith tradition to ready him for these tasks. He learned to trust God and grew in his understanding of our sacred texts. Elizabeth's connection to the Aaron tradition and my connection to the Prophetic tradition and our love of him prepared him well, I like to think.

At some point in his teens John decided it was time to take his education away from home. He was feeling drawn to the wilderness. The wilderness is a pretty extreme place to set up your camp, we reminded him. But he seemed to have his mind made up and how does one argue with a teenager set on a certain path? So we offered him our blessing and he left for the wilderness. And he has remained there to this day. Some say he has joined a religious community out there they call the Essenes. Maybe he has, and maybe he is on his own among the beasts and angels they say dwell out there. The child has his destiny and we have done for him what we could. At some point we must let our children go and trust that they are in God's hand and will be sustained.

Conclusion

That brings me to end of my story. The truth is we are childless once again. We are grateful for having had the joy of being parents even if it was for a time shorter than what we expected. In this respect it isn't easy. But we learned something of a helpful routine.

We trust. We pray. We serve. We question. We grieve. We consider our blessings. We bless others. We hope. And then we do it all over again: trust, pray, serve, question, grieve, consider our blessings, bless others, and hope. That has become routine as Elizabeth and I continue to await the fulfillment of the promises of God which the angel Gabriel offered us. Amen.

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Epilogue: Luke 1-6

.....during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '