

“ADVENT STUNS EVEN THE FAITHFUL”

Luke 1:5-25

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Zechariah, of the priestly order of Abijah, has been chosen by lot—a once in a lifetime chance—to approach the sanctuary for the evening incense offering. Each day at 3:00, the faithful gather in an outer court, while the priest goes into the sanctuary to offer prayers and light the incense. The smoke of the incense rising signals to the people that their prayers have gone up to God. But today, the priest is taking an awful long time in there, and after a while, “I don’t know what he’s doing,” and “Can we get on with this,” and “I’ve got a lunch date,” and “I’ve got a tee time,” and “I’ve got to get this turkey in the oven or we’ll never have dinner,” turns into “Is this normal?” and, “Is he okay?” and, “Shouldn’t someone go check on him?” and, “What if something’s happened?”

So, let’s go check on Zechariah, shall we? There he is, face flushed, palms sweating, incense still lying on the altar, unlit. Zechariah’s pulse is high and his knees are close to buckling and he’s beginning to perspire through his robe. There’s no telling how many times he’s dreamed of performing this service without a hitch. But now he finds himself accompanied by the angel Gabriel, whose presence, according to Luke, is not only terrifying but overwhelming. Zechariah receives the message, turns to leave, the matchbox falls out of his hand to the ground, as he walks out to attempt the customary benediction. Then, raising his hands to bless the congregation, he opens his mouth to speak, but his voice is gone...

What do you expect to happen when you come to worship God? Luke says Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are “getting on in years.” So, I imagine Zechariah is rather conditioned to the service of his ministry in a way that most of us are conditioned to the ordinariness of our particular lives. You come to Bible Study expecting...what? Fellowship, interesting biblical insights, coffee and hugs and handshakes. But every now and then—and you can never predict when—something happens. A prayer request transforms the room. An old grudge melts away. Or a text holds you in its clutches. We come into this sanctuary expecting...what? Beautiful liturgy and music. Maybe the sermon will be relevant this time. Hopefully, we’ll leave wiser and more discerning. A closed mind will open. A hard heart will soften. But every now and then—and you can never predict when—church becomes Body and Blood, and a revelation about God leaves us stunned, speechless.

Do you remember when God comes to Abraham directly, saying, “I will bless Sarah, and moreover I will give you a son by her”? In that event, Abraham doesn’t lose his voice. He falls on his face laughing. “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old, and to a woman who’s ninety?” Only today, Zechariah isn’t laughing, but mute. Why? Because Zechariah’s been to church every Sunday for decades upon decades. He’s forgotten more about ministry than most ministers will ever know. He’s taught this very story about the radical fulfillment of God’s promises. But, truth-be-told, only as an abstraction with an occasional flourish. Abraham’s is a crucial story for Zechariah. It has given shape and structure and a foundation to his entire

ministry. Zechariah has God's promise to Abraham memorized. We might even say written on his heart. And yet, it remains merely that, a story. A legendary witness about someone else.

And yet, when Zechariah got the luck of the draw (for that's how priests were chosen to enter the sanctuary), he knew he'd not only pray the prayers of his people with great faithfulness, but he'd also be slipping in a little prayer for himself and his wife of many years, Elizabeth: "Lord, please give us a child." Zechariah remembers his dear wife coming up to him so many years ago and giving him the idea. "Why don't you pray for us for a change?" she says. Now he's been doing it so long it's simply become habit. See, Abraham was a hundred and Zechariah's not nearly that old, but Abraham is just a story and, well, this is reality. But Zechariah keeps on praying it anyhow, "Lord, please give us a child," though it's more protest than petition at this point.

Then God's messenger appears. "Not only will Elizabeth bear you a son, he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will carry Elijah's spirit in his breast, and he will turn many people to repent, and prepare a people for the Lord." But, in almost textbook style for a seasoned minister, when God finally does show up, Zechariah has some questions. While he adjusts his eyes to Gabriel's splendor, he cannot fathom Gabriel's words. "How will I know this is so? For I'm an old man, and my wife is thinking more about retirement than babies these days." Gabriel responds, "I stand in the presence of God. But now, because you did not believe my words, you will become mute until the day these things occur..."

You almost want to shake Zechariah awake. What more sign do you need, man? An angel of the Lord standing in front of you isn't enough? It could be that Zechariah is afraid to go out and tell the people what the angel told him. They're expecting a benediction, after all, not a baby announcement. It could be that Zechariah is afraid Elizabeth will think he's begun to lose his senses. "Right, right, Zach, an *angel* told you. Did he now?" It could be that Zechariah was afraid he wasn't cut out to be the father of such a remarkable child. With the spirit and power of Elijah? Or it could be that Zechariah was afraid it just might be true that the God who fulfilled promises to Abraham also fulfills promises to Abraham's descendants. It can be quite a fearful thing to discover that, all this time, God has been listening to our prayers...

In some ways, Zechariah reminds me of the many faithful churches across our land who have become so "used to" faith that even when we do pray for God to show up and God *does* show up, we still want it to be on our terms. Can you imagine coming face-to-face with the angel Gabriel, and he bears almost impossibly wonderful news, but you say, "Well, yes, but I still have a few concerns." So, we established, aging, nevertheless obedient, faithful, earnestly praying churches might do well to consider Zechariah's muzzel as a warning. If Zechariah had accepted Gabriel's message with swift hope, think of the bold witness he could have been in that moment before all the people gathered there. "Goodness, Zechariah has come before us with a spring in his step. What word from the Lord will he bring?" But it isn't until he goes through a radical transformation, and finally submits to God's will, that God lets Zechariah speak again.

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we gaze on the candle of hope, let's not forget the hope we've carried in our hearts for new life in this place. Do we in our steady posture as a nearly 200-year-

old congregation retain the capacity to be stunned by God's promise of new life? Spirit of the living God, don't silence us!

Stunning God, stun us again,

Terrifying God, terrify us again,

Overwhelming God, overwhelm us again!

That we may behold that you are doing a new thing, and that we may perceive it!

What do you think might happen if we pray the prayer Zechariah held close to his chest all those years? Why don't we see? Why don't we pray like Zechariah did when he whispered under his breath?

Almighty and Everlasting God, gracious and forgiving and abounding in steadfast love, you know the longings of my heart. Would you make good on your promises to Israel, and send us Messiah? Would you make good on your promises and restore our fortunes? Would you make good on your promises and make your people as impossible to count as the stars in the sky? Would you come near to those in the congregation who, along with Elizabeth and I, bear the suffering of barren wombs? Would you lift up their hearts in their grief, and come close to them, and make your promises known to them. Strengthen them to hold on to hope, even to hope against hope, for new life. Disrupt their sorrow with revelations of divine love. Open their eyes to see your bewildering glory and their ears to hear a new song. And bless them with new life, that their homes may become places of hope fulfilled.

Bless the whole congregation with eyes to see your will unfolding, and ears to hear a stunning message of new creation rising up in our midst, that we may recognize and respond to your unexpected intrusions with faithful obedience. Let the old see visions, and the young dream new dreams, as you make a new way in the wilderness for your people, and do new things among us that will make the ears of all who hear of it tingle.

...Amen

It tickles me to think about whoever the next priest was who entered the sanctuary after Zechariah. After word got out about what happened to Zechariah, can you imagine the next priest pulling back the curtain and wondering—is it safe to come in?

No, it's never safe here...but it *is* pregnant with the terrifying... overwhelming... presence of God.