

Advent 1 – Hope
December 3, 2023
Luke 1:5-15a & 18-25

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

Luke begins his gospel by telling the story of a married couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah is a member of the clergy, and Elizabeth is a descendant of the Hebrew people's, first high priest, Aaron. This couple had religious connections. But the gospel writer Luke tells us, that what really sets Elizabeth and Zechariah apart was not their distinguished associations but their solid ethics; they were righteous people-blameless folks. Oh, and one more thing, writes Luke, like many other couples whose stories appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, these two good people had no children. They had prayed fervently for a child, but the months and years went by without a without a baby-and now they were getting old; they were past the age when prayers for a child seemed sensible; they had aged to the point where hoping for a baby was no longer logical. I suspect that over time Elizabeth and Zechariah made their peace with this fate.

Then came the event that would change everything. Zechariah received an honour. The aging priest was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem to burn incense. This was a big deal. Some priests would spend a lifetime of service, never to draw the specially marked stone from the jar, never to be so fortunate as to enter that portion of the temple where God was thought to reside. This was a very big deal.

It was a bit scary, too, for around this ritual were ancient, frightening tales that warned of incense offerings gone horribly wrong-one story in particular (passed down, no doubt, by Elizabeth's family) described how two of Aaron's sons were consumed by fire while on duty as priests bearing incense to God – you can find that story in Leviticus. The message behind such anecdotes was clear: If you were to waltz into the sanctuary with an unclean heart, the divine holiness could fry you to a crisp. With stories like that being whispered among his fellow priests, I imagine that Zechariah entered the temple with as spotless a spirit as he could muster. And yet, even a healthy score on the I've been really really good - had not prepared him for what he would encounter in the sanctuary. The story tells us that as Zechariah approached the altar to ignite his fragrant herbs under the very nose of God, an angel appeared, and the priest was suddenly, utterly terrified.

Facing the completely freaked out Zechariah, the angel Gabriel first tells the priest to be calm down. Then he explains that Zechariah's prayer has been answered, that the priest's wife, Elizabeth, will conceive, that they will have a son whom they will name "John." He will be a prophet, and, says Gabriel, he will turn the hearts of people to their children.

Trying to get a handle on this extraordinary moment, reaching for a rational response to the angel's announcement, Zechariah points out that both he and his wife

are getting on in years, and he asks for a sign that this thing will happen. Gabriel's reply to the unbelieving priest is a classic. You want a sign? You, a priest who should know the stories, who should remember Sarah and Hannah, who should recall all of the times that God has assisted couples beyond hope in conceiving. You want a sign? You are standing in the sanctuary of God. Terrified. Your knees are quaking. You are speaking with an angel who dwells in the presence of the Holy One. And you want a sign? Well, how about this? Here's your sign: You will be mute, silent, until all of this comes true. You want a sign!! Can you picture Gabriel hitting his celestial forehead with the palm of his hand – “You want a sign!”

How many times have we been just like Zachariah. Standing in holy places hearing the outrageous, generous love of God poured out and not believed it for our selves.

How many times have we faced challenges in our lives and completely forgotten that we do not walk alone.

How many times have our hearts been broken by the pain of the world and instead of stepping up - we have hidden or shrugged and declared not my circus- not my moneys. How many times have we completely forgotten that we are the hands and feet of God and that even a cup of cold water is enough.

How many times have we been so focused on what we don't have that we have miss what is right in front of us.

How many times have we felt completely stuck in a difficult situation and we have forget that the God power is waiting for us to open our hearts and our minds to what new thing is possible.

Maybe like Zachariah we need to shhhh long enough to hear what God is up to. To stop looking for what we expect and start looking for God's surprises.

We are a forgetful people. We have heard the story of a way ward son welcomed home by his father, we have heard of a woman rescued from a stoning, and of little ones welcomed. We have heard the story of a love so strong it led to a cross and then to an empty tomb. We can even tell stories of our own experience of God's transforming presence in our own lives - but we forget.

Advent invites us to shhh long enough to remember that God was with an old man and his wife, and God was moving mysteriously in the life of their baby - held in a womb too old for such wonder.

That a young Mary said yes to God and carried and birth a child so full of love it changed everything.

That a guy named Joesph believed what an angle told him and did the wrong thing, according to rules of his day, but ended up doing the very right thing.

That God showed the gift of love to sinky shepherds and stars shone in the darkness - to lead them to something so new they could hardly believe their eyes.

And one little baby was more powerful than we will ever understand.

God gives us hope for this messed up world and our complicated lives we just need to shhh and remember. Amen

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