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Luke 1:13-20

Slow Down, Pay Attention: Zechariah & Elizabeth

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 1:13-20 Common English Bible

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John.  He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God.  He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old.”

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in God’s presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

Prayer -- God, You are present everywhere; you can be found in the largest palaces and in the tiniest tents. You never forsake us; whether we are in the midst of a crowd or alone on a mountaintop, you are near. You are nearer than our own breath; even if we don’t sense you. You are our refuge, our rock, and our safe place. Amen.

We are in the season of Advent as we prepare for the coming of Jesus in the manger on Christmas morning but Jesus is also arriving in fullness in the second coming of Christ. We look forward to a time when God will make all things right. We live in an in-between time, God has come in Jesus to bring hope to the world, and there will be a time when that will be more fully realized. As we wait, we continue to work out our salvation by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

There is so much of the Christian story that we know. We know about baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the wise men. There are some characters that are more in the shadows They aren’t in our nativity sets but they have compelling stories that we can learn from. We have to slow down and pay attention to learn about these characters because they aren’t as well known. There aren’t any Christmas carols about Zechariah, and his name doesn’t rhyme with anything except Hezekiah and that does not help us.

The Gospel of Luke starts with Zechariah and Elizabeth. We learn that these two folks have the pedigree, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron. Aaron was Moses’ brother and helped lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Zechariah had an impressive lineage too. He was a priest. Elizabeth and Zechariah are good people. They obey all the laws, they pray a lot, they read their Scripture, they do everything they are supposed to do when you are good people.

But, they did not have children. Today, it is viewed as a medical challenge when you can’t have children. In the first century it was viewed as a spiritual challenge. In the first century, your ability to have children or not was directly tied to how God felt about you. You couldn’t say in the first century, “I am a good person but I don’t have children.” If you couldn’t have children, you wondered what it was that you did wrong to cause this in your own life. Thank God we have grown from that understanding and now see it as a medical challenge.

We don’t know how often Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed to be able to have a child. We do know that after months and years of hoping, nothing happening, nothing changed, and it is easy to imagine how their hope died. I can totally understand why. We have all been disappointed. We have all experienced a loss of hope, and we figure out how to close our heart a little bit so that we can keep on going.

Zechariah is a priest and he has won the lottery to go into the holy of holies to burn incense. It was a huge honor to burn incense in the middle of the temple. For an hour Zechariah would be in God’s presence and the other priests and the other people would wait. It was very serious. The holy of holies was the inner sanctuary of the temple, it represented the meeting place between God and God’s people. The priest in the holy of holies connected God with the people. All of the people gathered to worship outside while Zechariah burned incense because they needed a go-between.

The angel came to visit Zechariah while he was in the inner chamber of the temple. He doesn’t see the angel at first. He is in the holy of holies, going about his work of burning incense. Of course God is going to show up. But Zechariah doesn’t seem to have any of that expectation because he is startled and overcome with fear when he sees the angel.

Do we expect God to show up in our lives? We go about our day, we go about our work, and we don’t stop. We don’t pay attention. We don’t expect God to show up, we aren’t in the holy of holies, after all. We are at home, or in the car, or at the office. Here is the thing, God is there. We put our head down and we don’t realize that God is standing right where we are. We only have to look, slow down, and pay attention to see God and all the ways that God is working in our lives.

Then we have the conversation that we read in our Scripture. Why do angels always start out telling people to not be afraid? Jesus does that too. When we have this experience with the divine, the divine has to tell us not to be afraid. Who wouldn’t be terrified of an angel or of an encounter with God? That seems like a normal reaction.

The angel says that Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to be parents and the baby’s name will be John. He will bring many people to the Lord their God. He will make ready a people so they are prepared for the Lord. It sounds awesome! But, Zechariah doesn’t say, “How cool!” He says, “What are you talking about? I don’t believe you. We are too old.”

Zechariah has experienced a lot of disappointment and he can’t put himself through having hope again. We do that too. We say, “Prove it,” to God all the time. We have prayed and hoped and we have heard nothing. We have been hurt too many times. When we hope, there is the possibility that we can be hurt again. It is hard to hold on to hope.

I love the angel’s response to Zechariah, “Know this: what I have spoken will come true at the proper time.” Not on your timetable, but on God’s timetable. This is happening, get ready. The angel says that because Zechariah didn’t believe, he will not be able to speak until the day these things happen. The silence here is seen as a punishment for Zechariah’s doubt. Have you ever been unable to speak?

I went on a 5-day retreat where we had three hours of quiet each day. I never knew I had so many thoughts in my head until I stopped talking. I was able to sense God’s presence with me so easily when I stopped talking. I felt in my heart that I was God’s beloved child. Maybe in losing his voice Zechariah was given the time and space to remember who he was and who he was called to be. He was able to take time to listen instead of speaking. Later when Elizabeth has the baby, people wanted to name him Zechariah after his father. Zechariah is able to speak to share that his son will be called John.

We live in an in-between time. God is with us and for us and we celebrate that at Christmas. But it is in-between time because we still experience pain and brokenness and disappointment. We still live in a broken world. We live in a world where we don’t expect to experience God. We live in a world where we are used to bad news.

Today the United Methodist Church is asking us to observe Global Migration Sunday. In Advent we are celebrating the birth of Jesus who had to flee his homeland with Mary and Joseph after King Herod threatened Jesus’ life with the order of the massacre of the children under the age of two (Matthew 2:13-14). In our world there are 65 million men, women and children forced to leave their houses and migrate to places that they don’t know. They do this because of violence and wars, natural disasters, persecution, and economic hardships. They face hazardous travel, cultural barriers and the physical and emotional costs of arriving in strange lands where they are not always welcome and often persecuted.

We pray today for God’s mercy and justice for our brothers and sisters who are suffering on the journey of forced migration on the face of the earth. Our Communion Offering today will help respond to the human suffering inflicted by forced migration.

We are called today to look for God. To look for God when we see someone whose life experience has been completely different than our own. To look for God when we are wanting to yell at our kids because they are driving us crazy. To look for God when we are watching the news and feel hopeless and afraid. To look for God when we don’t know the next step forward.

The good news is that Jesus the Christ is bringing about redemption. We have a choice to make. We can do Christmas as usual. We can be distracted and busy and keep our head down and not see God in our midst. We can be filled with doubt. Or there is another path.

A path of slowing down and paying attention. We can follow the path that God has forged for us through Jesus which is to look for God all around us. This is a story of individuals standing up. It is a story of God’s people getting a voice. It is a story of God is doing something new. We can listen and give a voice to the voiceless and be changed and molded by those voices. This is a path that we need to follow. This is the path toward the kingdom of God. That is Advent. Thanks be to God, Amen.