

## Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 22, 2019, Zechariah's Song

Robert Fulghum tells the story of being in charge of 80 five-year-olds one day, and needing to come up with a game to keep them busy for an hour. He remembered a version of Rock, Paper and Scissors called Giants, Wizards and Dwarves. Each child, on command, needed to pair up with another child and act out being a giant, a wizard, or a dwarf. The giant beat the wizard, the wizard beat the dwarf and the dwarf beat the giant.

Organized chaos ensued as each child ran around and then on command, found a partner, acted out their part, and decided who won. While this mayhem was going on, Fulghum felt a tug on his pant leg. He looked down and saw the huge blue eyes of a five-year-old girl. Yes? he said. The little girl replied, Um, where do the mermaids go? She didn't seem to fit, but she knew who she was.

Always during Advent we hear about John the Baptist, and he doesn't seem to fit into the story. When he grows up, he will play outside the lines. But he will prepare the way for Jesus. We have his birth story today. His dad was a priest named Zechariah, who only got to serve in the temple two weeks a year because there were so many priests. A thousand priests would serve at the temple at any one time, taking turns offering various kinds of sacrifices.

So on this particular day Zechariah, this country priest, has been chosen to burn the incense. Luke says he and his wife Elizabeth were blameless, obeying all the commandments, righteous before God. But they had an enormous pain at the center of their marriage. They were childless. Luke says Elizabeth was barren. It was always the woman's fault in this patriarchal culture. Barrenness was not only a huge disgrace in the community; it was also seen as a sign of God's disfavor. So they must have thought, What have we done wrong? I thought we were obeying God? Why do we deserve this punishment? And as Luke says, they were getting on in years. They carried that shame with them day after day.

So as Zechariah was offering incense, I'm sure he was praying for a child, even in these later years of life. You know that kind of prayer, when there is an issue in your life that you keep bringing before God: illness, or a strained relationship, or a loved one with an addiction, and you find yourself praying about it, whenever your mind isn't occupied with something else.

So on this day he is praying and offering incense up to God, and an angel appears to the right of the altar. For the Jewish people, God appeared in forms they could understand. The priest is terrified, of course, and the angel says (as angels often say), “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before them, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah hears that his son will be like Elijah, who was the prophet the people thought would return to prepare the way for the Messiah. So the priest must have been thrilled to think their son would help bring in the Messianic reign that they had been waiting for, release from the Roman occupiers, the new reign of God. Bring it on, Zechariah must have thought.

And Zechariah asks, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” He’s got reason to be skeptical.

The angel says, You know this because I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I was sent to bring you this good news. But now, because you didn’t believe this news, you will remain mute until the birth of this baby. As was mentioned in last week’s nativity pageant, perhaps his wife Elizabeth would welcome a little silence around the house!

The priests would often appear at the wall of the courtyard and offer a blessing to the people. So when he finally comes out, and is motioning to them without speaking, they realize that he has seen a vision. He finishes up his time of service, and goes home. By the way, he does not say, Honey, I’m home! when he walks in the door. He will be speechless until this baby arrives.

Elizabeth does conceive, and for five months she stays in seclusion. She says, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

The baby is born, and when he is eight days old, they take him to the temple to be circumcised. They are going to name him Zechariah after his father. And Elizabeth says, No; he is going to be called John, which means God is gracious.

And everybody says, Wait a minute, Elizabeth. Nobody in your family is named John. So they motion to Zechariah, and ask him what name he wants to use. Zechariah asks for a tablet, and scribbles out excitedly, His name is John. Immediately his mouth is opened and his tongue freed up, and he begins to speak and to praise God. And everybody all over the Judean hillside is talking about this, it's trending, and they are asking: What then will this child become?

Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins to prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and has redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty servant for us in the house of his servant David, (Jesus comes from David's family tree), 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."

Remember that Luke is writing after the Romans have destroyed the temple, between 70 and 80 AD. There are Roman soldiers on every street corner. Caesar is demanding to be called lord and savior. So for the community of Christians who heard Luke's words for the first times, it might have been tempting to think, Yes, God will take care of our enemies and everybody who hates us. God will set us free from the Romans.

Zechariah continues his song: "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 us all our days." So if they were hearing this Jesus story for the first time, they might have thought, we're going to be rescued from our enemies.

The language sounds like a well-known first-century before Christ description of the Messiah from the Psalms of Solomon: "See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David ... Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample her to destruction ... to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth" (Psalms of

Solomon 18). Good guys versus evildoers. It's language that we often hear in our world today: us versus them.

But then Zechariah continues, "And you, child (meaning John the Baptist), will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways," and the way of Jesus will not be demolishing their enemies! No, Zechariah continues, Jesus will "give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." Jesus doesn't show up with a sword, he shows up offering forgiveness. He will bring people back to God and will reconcile relationships through forgiveness. He throws around forgiveness extravagantly. He forgives his enemies from the cross. The religious people hate him because he is forgiving people who shouldn't be forgiven. They haven't earned it. And yet Jesus forgives them, and then treats them as forgiven people.

And then Zechariah's song concludes: "By the tender mercy of our God the dawn 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."

The tender mercy of God...Mercy is a quality that Jesus demands of his disciples. Later in Luke we hear these words of Jesus: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive that much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." –Luke 6:32-36

Zechariah says, By the tender mercy of our God the dawn will break upon us...And if that mercy of God is our model, if that's what God is like, then God calls *us* to be like the dawn breaking on others who need to know mercy.

Mike Yaconelli was a pastor in the small town of Yreka in Northern California, pastoring what he called "the slowest growing church in America." He was killed in a car accident at 61 years of age. In his book, *Dangerous Wonder*, he says that when he preached his sermons, his people would often interrupt him. (I guess I don't give you that chance.) One day he was finishing his sermon about the church

“loving outside the lines,” as God loves, and a sixteen-year-old girl said, That was a good sermon, Pastor, but I was thinking that if we’re supposed to love outside the lines, then I know how we can do it. In three weeks the Siskiyou County Fair is coming, and with the fair come the “carnies.” (Carnies are the itinerant workers who travel with a fair. Every year the carnies were the talk of this rural town. Most of them were scary looking with tattoos (of course that just sounds like Portland now) and muscles and hard-looking faces. People always made derogatory comments about them.)

The high schooler said, Instead of us making fun of the carnies, maybe we should have a dinner and welcome them to town. The church agreed, and this high school girl organized the whole event. She called the manager of the fair for permission, and called the owner of the carnival and asked if they would want a dinner. The owner said, How about a lunch just before the fair opened? So the girl said, All right, we’ll grill hamburgers and cheeseburgers and have salads and desserts and drinks. How many can we expect? The owner said, Fifty.

The day of the lunch about twenty people from the church showed up to help. There was enough food for seventy. At 12:30 when lunch was to begin, only four of the carnival workers showed up. But by 1:30, they hadn’t served 50, or 75, or 150 carnies, they had served 200. Word kept getting around that these often-unaccepted and feared people were being given loving hospitality. When it looked like they were running out of food, the sixteen-year-old came running to the pastor and said, We’re running out of food- go get some!

When the lunch was over, numerous carnival workers came up to the teenager and thanked her. One older lady who had been working carnivals for a long time came up to the girl and said, I have been doing carnivals for forty years, and this is the first time I have been welcomed to town. When that story was written down the church had been hosting the all-you-can-eat carnie lunch for seven years, all because a high school girl believed that God loved those workers as much as God loved her.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way for a Messiah who would show mercy and offer forgiveness. This Messiah would find ways to include, not to exclude. We seem to be at a time in our country where we are finding ways to see how

different we are from each other, to label ourselves insiders and others outsiders, to write each other off because we disagree with each other. That's not the way of Jesus. I can't wait to spend the next three-and-a-half months studying Mark's Gospel to discover how we can follow this Messiah Jesus better. We'll start next week. Amen.