

“In the Presence of God”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:5-25, 57-80
December 22, 2019 - Fourth Sunday of Advent

We have spent Advent focused on exile, with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah falling, and Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple being destroyed, and last week we heard about groundbreaking on the new temple. That second temple, more than four-hundred years later, is where the Gospel of Luke begins.

Here we encounter Zechariah and Elizabeth. He’s a priest and she comes from a long line of priests. For two weeks out of each year, Zechariah’s division of priests is on duty at the temple in Jerusalem. During those two weeks, lots are cast to carry out particular tasks. Zechariah is chosen to enter the sanctuary to offer the incense offering, and things do not go as he expected.

Listen for Good News from the Gospel according to Luke:

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children...and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you 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 must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 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 him, 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 said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went

to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "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."

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 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. 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 him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high 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 child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

There is a lot of work that goes into preparing our sanctuary for worship. Our Office Manager Kathy Tracey comes through on Friday afternoon, straightening things up, tidying the pews, and replacing fellowship pads and prayer cards. A man named Eric is here every Saturday. We have been one of his cleaning assignments for over a decade. He vacuums up any crumbs, tiny pieces of paper, or — at least this week — wayward cotton balls that remain. On Sunday, Pat gets the organ warmed up. Craig and Rick make sure our oil candles are filled. Ray or Don usually turn on the sound system. Twice a year a delightful man named Charlie tunes the piano. Susan and Mary take care of the delicate communion preparations and ensure that there are flowers to beautify the space. A whole crew of helpers put up the tree and greenery for Advent.

Thanks be to God for all these priestly acts of service! But there is one job I try to keep for myself. The fancy fabrics that decorate the pulpit and the lectern are called paraments and we have different colors for different seasons and holy days of the church. Early in my tenure here, Amanda caught me changing the paraments from green to white and she told me that we could easily find a volunteer to take care of that.

That's when I confessed that I *really* like changing the parameters. I told Amanda how I sometimes imagine myself to be living in England, quietly serving as the vicar of a tiny old stone church in one of the villages in the Cotswolds, preparing the sanctuary for a congregation full of wonderfully quirky characters. Aside from the accents and the architecture, I'm pretty much living the dream here, y'all.

As of this morning, I have not heard that any of us who prepare this space for worship have run into an angel named Gabriel with a message from God. I want to give Zechariah a hard time for being so surprised and afraid at something holy and miraculous happening while he's making an offering to God in one of the holiest places on earth, on behalf of God's people, while working as a priest. An argument could be made that, at that moment, he was better prepared than almost anyone for an angelic visit.

But, honestly, if the angel did appear at 850 Oxmoor Road I'm not certain how I'd react. I'm pretty sure Susan and Mary would know what to do.

The angel says what angels always must say to humans in scripture: "Do not be afraid." And then he tells Zechariah how there will be a baby and he is to be named John. And the child will be special and will have special responsibilities and he will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

We have heard this story before, and so has Zechariah. When Abraham and Sarah were told that they would soon be expecting, Abraham fell on his face laughing and Sarah got caught laughing by God. And then they named their kid Isaac, which means "laughter."

We have heard this story before, but Zechariah is a few verses ahead of Mary being told that she would soon be expecting. "How can this be?" she asks, and Gabriel explains and she replies, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." And when she goes to visit Elizabeth, she sings her song of the world turned upside-down that Evann read and which is paraphrased in our first hymn.

We have heard this story before, but it's a different thing entirely when it's you the angel is telling to not be afraid. Maybe it's the phrasing of his question; Zechariah doesn't ask how it's going to work, but rather "How will I know that this is so?" He's not questioning God so much as the angel's reliability. He ought to know better — he knows this story. Or perhaps he just caught Gabriel on a bad day. In any case, Gabriel gets a bit defensive: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God...because you did not believe my words...you will become mute...until the day these things occur."

Oops. Laughing is okay. Asking for clarification works. Asking for proof? Let's all remember not to do that if an angel arrives on a Sunday morning.

The people outside immediately realize something special has happened. A priest walks into the temple sanctuary and comes out unable to speak? You figure something intense must have happened in there.

Zechariah goes home, and Gabriel wasn't fibbing, and Elizabeth is cautious about sharing the news. But then the baby comes and the family thinks he should be named after his Pops. Fun with Biblical names

isn't limited to the Hebrew Scriptures. "Zechariah" means "the LORD remembers." But Elizabeth wants to name the child "John" which means "the LORD is gracious." Luke's Gospel will not begin with God simply remembering what was, but responding to a groaning world with grace. Zechariah confirms Elizabeth's choice as the name the angel gave him and now he can speak and starts praising and it's the neighbors' turn to be afraid.

Word spreads and everyone wonders, "What then will this child become?" It's a question that crossed my mind a few dozen times during last Sunday's pageant, knowing that one part of what our children become is influenced by what we teach them. We are trying really hard here to help children become questioners and curious souls and wildly inclusive in a way that disturbs the neighbors.

Speaking of "wild," it's the Holy Spirit's turn with papa Zechariah, and now when Zechariah speaks about the holy thing, you can't stop him. He starts with a priestly blessing: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel!" and goes on to tell of redemption and salvation and mercy. All of that leads to serving God without fear. And then his prophecy turns toward his son. John will be "the prophet of the Most High" and he will go before in order to prepare. And we know that this is exactly who John will become -- the one who attracts a crowd by baptizing and preaching repentance and mercy and then points them toward Jesus.

Zechariah proclaims that "the dawn from on high 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." This Zechariah is barely recognizable from the quaking priest. The presence of God he experienced — in meeting with Gabriel, in the birth of this child, in the better part of a year spent in silence, only able to listen — it has transformed him.

You should never watch *Law & Order* with a lawyer. And you shouldn't watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas* with a Presbyterian minister, because there's a chance they'll want to tell you about Linus's blanket. The kids are all on the stage and Charlie Brown cries out for someone to explain to him what Christmas is all about. Cool as a cucumber, Linus says he'll do it, no big deal.

He asks for the lights to dim, and standing in a spotlight he quotes the Gospel of Luke from memory. If you watch carefully while he says, "the angel said unto them, 'Fear not; for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord,'" you'll see the little miracle. Linus drops his beloved blue security blanket to the floor at "Fear not" and finishes with both hands waving and pointing, all prophet-like. When he's finished with his proclamation, Linus recovers his blanket and holds onto it until the end, when he uses it to wrap the little Christmas tree and the whole gang starts singing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

It is not *our* holiness that prompts the incarnation of God — God's presence with us in Jesus Christ.

It is not the things we prepare that make Christmas miraculous.

Preparing for the Christ child is not about getting ourselves more pure, more perfect, more pious.

Everything we know about the people who were involved and how they responded and then the life that Jesus lived and to whom he spoke and what he gave and what he taught points us toward a different

preparation.

Preparing for incarnation requires us to put aside perfection and embrace audaciousness.

It requires us to be more fearless.

To be more ridiculous in what we are willing to say is true.

To be more courageous in letting go of the things we imagine will give us security.

Preparing for incarnation requires being able to dream of a world truly ready to receive him — one free of cages and walls and all that dehumanizes beloved children of God.

Preparing to be in God's presence means talking less and being tongue-tied more.

Preparing to be in God's presence means proclaiming the truth of mercy and love in a way that makes the neighbors talk and absolutely terrifies the dehumanizers and cage -onstructers and wall-builders.

When John grew up and ate his locusts and honey and shouted in the wilderness about preparing the way, he talked on and on about repentance — turning, changing your mind, expanding your consciousness, opening your understanding. I think he got that from his Pops.

In the time that remains — a few days to Christmas, and then all the days you have beyond:

Listen for the presence of God.

Listen, and do not speak.

Listen for peace.

Listen for hope.

Listen for love.

And then proclaim it all just a bit more loudly than you're comfortable doing.

And do not fear, for there is good news of great joy ahead.

Amen.