

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
December 13, 2023
3rd Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:68-79
3rd in the “Weary World Rejoices” series

“Zechariah’s Song”

How does a weary world rejoice? This is the question we’re considering during Advent. We began the first week by acknowledging our weariness while affirming that God doesn’t want us to be weary. And last week we talked about finding joy through connections with other people, or nature or God or hobbies, and I gave some suggestions at the end of the sermon for ways you might connect . . . and apparently it worked! I heard that 2 of our 3 zip code dinners saw a lot of new faces; and about 3 times as many women came to the Advent by Candlelight service than we had originally expected. This is fantastic! And here I’m going to put in a shameless plug for my Open House this afternoon; I hope you come, I want you to come, and it’s a great way to connect with others and just have fun in this Advent season.

Today the topic is welcoming the unexpected and trusting that God really can do the impossible! Friends, this is an important way a weary world rejoices; by believing against all odds that God is telling our sometimes faithless and broken world that things really can be different; that it’s time to stop believing the myth that “this is how things always are and things will never be any different”; because you know what? God has other things in mind for us, for you! So put on your seatbelts! Because it’s going to be one heckuva ride; because friends, God is always bigger than our imaginations.

Now when our story for today opens Elizabeth is giving birth to the son she and her husband Zechariah were promised by the angel Gabriel way back at the beginning of Luke’s gospel.

As a refresher, Zechariah and Elizabeth didn’t have any children. They’d prayed for years for a child, but never conceived. Luke tells us they were

good and honorable people. In fact, Zechariah was a priest, and Elizabeth was of noble heritage. Luke tells us they were righteous, which means they were doing everything right. But things didn't turn out as they'd hoped. Have we done something wrong, they may have asked?

Perhaps you, too, have asked this question when things . . . life . . . hasn't gone as planned. Did I do something wrong? Could I have done something better? Could I have done something differently? These are natural questions for anyone to ask when life doesn't turn out like we'd hoped and we feel a sense of emptiness or barrenness.

But Luke is uninterested in trying to figure out if Zechariah and Elizabeth did something wrong, so that's not where he takes us. Instead, Luke starts where they are because God meets them where they are; which is to say, God meets them in that place of deep disappointment. And this where the surprise comes in because in the Bible, just when you get used to the status quo, along comes the unexpected. In this case, the unexpected comes in the form of the angel Gabriel who tells him that despite the odds, he's going to be a Dad after all.

Fear not! For your prayer has been heard, the angel tells Zechariah. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness. You will leap like a gazelle!

But for poor old grumpy Zechariah, the news is just too good to be true, and he can't help but tell the angel Gabriel that's what he thinks. "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

Well, he must have caught Angel Gabriel on an off day, because his sassy retort so perturbs the angel, that the angel strikes him mute. The poor priest, he can't talk! Which turns out to be a blessing, but I can tell you as a preacher who has had many a nightmare about stepping into the pulpit on the most important Sunday of the year and forgetting my sermon, it's no laughing matter.

Well, what are you gonna do? The show must go on, as they say. So Zechariah emerges from the temple, makes some flimsy motions to the

biggest congregation he's ever seen, and then goes home. Silent. To his wife Elizabeth who, just as the Angel Gabriel promised, conceives. This is when our reading for today opens, with Elizabeth giving birth, the couple naming their son John, and Zechariah miraculously speaking – singing, really -- after 5 long months of silence.

And when he sings, boy does he sing. Gone is the old grumpy Zechariah. In his place is a new Zechariah, and this one is singing the Broadway musical opening, show-stopper number of his life.

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
He came and set his people free.
He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives,
And in the very house of David his servant,
Just as he promised long ago
Through the preaching of his holy prophets:
Deliverance from our enemies
And every hateful hand;
Mercy to our fathers,
As he remembers to do what he said he'd do,
What he swore to our father Abraham-
A clean rescue from the enemy camp,
So we can worship him without a care in the world,
Made holy before him as long as we live.*

*And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest,"
Will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,
Present the offer of salvation to his people,
The forgiveness of their sins.
Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness,
Those sitting in the shadow of death,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace."*

Now that is a song!!!

I can only imagine that poor old Zechariah, who stopped imagining in his dream of becoming a father long ago, looked down at his infant son, and knew with all his heart that with God a promise made is a promise kept. That nothing is impossible with God. And that the only limitations God has, are the limitations we impose. Let me say that again: that the only limitations God has, are the limitations we impose.

Friends, even though the Bible says that Elizabeth is the barren one for her inability to conceive, it's really Zechariah who is the barren one because he is unable to imagine that with God all things are possible.

For you see, Zechariah stopped believing that his future could be different than his present. He stopped imagining anything new could ever happen. And that's a barrenness that any of us feel when we stop looking forward to the future and choose instead to believe in the status quo.

Zechariah had long ago discarded any dreams and hopes for his future and instead decided to believe that life is just a matter of putting in time. He'd decided to stop imagining a new and better future-and not only one for himself, but for his people, his congregation, and his nation, too.

But on that day, holding his infant son John in his arms, he was a father filled with the hope that accompanies new life. It is the hope of salvation for all people: Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, blind and lame, tax collectors and sinners, women and men, old and young, fishermen and farmers, Samaritans and soldiers, lepers and lawyers, and so many countless others.

Friends, Zechariah urges us to believe that God can do the unexpected in our lives; that God can bring about changes we'd long stopped believing in and expecting to happen; that God can and will meet us where we are and do the impossible, no matter how messy our lives are.

But when that happens will we believe it? Can we believe it? When God promises something so different to us than what we'd come to expect out of our lives, how will you respond? Can we meet God's promise with faith? Will you trust it? Or will we treat as one more invitation to disappointment?

Zechariah met the Angel's promise with disbelief, and it wasn't until he had months of silence to ponder the news that he started to believe maybe it could be true – maybe he actually would be a father after all. Nadia Bolz Weber offers that maybe all of us should take a clue from Zechariah and be quiet now and then, and stop telling worn out stories about ourselves or the world or how things are – those stories that play on repeat in our head and we've believed for far too long -- so we can instead “embrace the terrifying beauty of what's possible without what's possible being imprisoned to what's come before.”

“As the transgressive fecundity of God that would change the entire world grew in the unlikely wombs of an old lady and a virgin teenager,” she writes – (Zechariah) he could not say a word, he could only receive it. It was as though God said “you want to see what I am about? Well then...Shut up about your old story and receive this new one.”

So how does a weary world rejoice?

- By welcoming the unexpected, and trusting that God can do the impossible.
- By silencing the voice in your head that tells you “this is how it is” and listening instead for the one that declares: no it's not. It can be different.
- By silencing yourself so you can listen for the voices of those long silenced who have been told repeatedly by the world, “This is how it is” even though God declares that it shouldn't be.
- And by following in Zechariah's footsteps and singing loud and clear for all to hear that things can be different; that God can be trusted.

Because friends, this is the promise of Advent. That the God who set in the world in motion at the very beginning, is also the God who raised up a Savior for us.

And this is why we can look to the future with hope and sing out with a defiant courage which proclaims that with God, all things are possible. Advent has the courage to believe that no matter what happens, no matter what bleak, miserable stuff life and the world throws at us, that God is

coming. And not only is God coming, but God is coming for you. That God will come with love and healing and hope into your life, whoever you are. God will come with light into whatever darkness you find yourself. God will come into your life, even when you cannot believe that's possible.

And so may all of us follow in Zechariah's shoes and become a prophet of a different story, a better story, a hopeful story about what is possible because God's love for us is far bigger than we can ever imagine.

Amen.