

FACES AT THE MANGER

Elizabeth and Zechariah: A Hint of Hope

Luke 1:5-25

December 1, 2024

If you were asked to tell the Christmas story to someone who had never heard it before, where would you start?

As a teenager of the 90s, I am partial to the Dave Matthews Band and their song appropriately titled "Christmas Song." I was moved the first time I heard the lyrics. Matthews launches the narrative this way:

She was his girl

He was her boyfriend

Soon to be his wife

Take him as her husband

A surprise on the way, any day, any day

One healthy little giggling dribbling baby boy

That's a good way to begin. And then there's the gospel writer Luke, perhaps the most gifted storyteller in the whole New Testament. His lens points us in a decidedly different direction. The first faces we see belong not to a healthy little giggling, dribbling baby boy, but to an elderly couple from the Judean hill country. Zechariah. Elizabeth. Luke starts his story not in Bethlehem, but in Jerusalem where Zechariah, a rural priest, has gone to perform his annual duties at the Temple.

You would agree it's an odd way to open the record of the Messiah's birth. These two minor characters. They appear nowhere else in scripture. Elderly folk who fade from sight after this opening scene. And yet, what if I told you that Luke's prologue provides precisely what you need this Advent season?

Luke says that Zechariah and Elizabeth have no children in their advanced age, and it is a story that readers of scripture will recognize. We have heard it before, repeated throughout the journey of God's people. Abraham and Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah. Rachel and Jacob. Hannah and Elkanah. Yes, we have met this couple

before in the pages of scripture. We know their faces. Weary and worn. Drained and downhearted.

But Luke, it's December! The season of Advent. A time of expectant waiting for joyful celebration. Why start here? Because Luke knows something about us. Not all of us start the season filled with anticipation. And so, Luke gives us this story of faithful believers who, like their ancestors, have almost stopped waiting, who no longer wake each day with expectation or hope. They represent us, any of us who have felt dispirited, downcast, demoralized. Any of us who have stopped believing for what we hoped would come. And I would guess that means all of us at some point. There is a chance that you find yourself in that place this morning.

Here's the thing. If we read these ancient stories, we know that God's blessing often surprises, often shows up when it is least expected. But knowing that in the abstract and trusting it in our lives are two very different matters. Consider Zechariah. The man is a priest. His entire vocational life revolves around rituals of remembrance and blessing. His profession is proclaiming the promise of God. And yet, when that promise is presented to him in the Temple in an unmistakable way, he is unable to see it. I get that. I think most of us can relate.

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that Zechariah's weakness is not the sin of disbelief, but the "habit of hopelessness." That description rings true to me. It describes one way we can approach these four weeks, this Advent season. How we can go through the motions and attend the services and sing the carols and read the verses and go to the gatherings, and through it all fail to imagine a future different from the present.

Call it emptiness. That feeling that God is a distant, lifeless concept rather than a force for our redemption. Call it emptiness. What so many feel this time of year. Our inability to see fresh possibilities. The fear of taking one step toward something new. Call it emptiness. The pain of strained relationships. The unwillingness to reach out and ask for help or forgiveness. Call it emptiness. The loss of vocational dreams discarded. The vacant space of personal hope abandoned. Emptiness. The sense that all this planning, all this preparing, all this striving, all this showing up will leave us no more fulfilled in four weeks when we are packing up the decorations we just took down for next year.

But that emptiness, the emptiness of our time, is about more than our personal lives. It describes leaders who cannot muster the courage to craft a vision beyond self-serving sound bites and short-term victories. It describes the hateful rhetoric and jeering taunts in place of constructive dialogue for the common good. Emptiness. It is the assumption of the worst in others that justifies the worst of us.

And, in this season, there is also the risk of theological emptiness: our failure to expect the arrival of God in our world and in our lives. After all, that is the promise of Advent—that God will show up. That God will bring hope to your life, wherever you are. That God will shine light into whatever darkness you are battling. And there, bathed in light... There, spoken to by a messenger of hope, Zechariah could not believe it. And maybe you can't either. Not yet. And so, the priest is given the spiritual gift of silent reflection. The first Advent season: nine months to quietly watch God do what God does. I can already tell you love the idea that God tells the preacher to stop speaking for a while. Picture his face. Zechariah needs a break. But he is not the only character in this story, not the only path through Advent.

Thank God there is Elizabeth. Her first words in the story come only after her husband has been silenced. Elizabeth is given no angelic messenger, no dramatic vision. She is not visited in the Temple. She just knows. She just trusts. She just hopes. And so, when she

speaks, her words are praise. "This is what the Lord has done for me." Elizabeth expects God's blessing, already on its way. Elizabeth trusts that hope is coming. God help us in the Church if we lose the will to welcome hope when it comes.

Elizabeth gives us what we need today. There is something about this season, about this Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and living among us in that newborn baby. There is something here that suggests that hope might actually have the last word—that joy will come when the darkness has faded and all is light. And in the meantime, these ancient stories, these elderly people, they keep us on tip toe to perceive the possibility.

As a kid, my favorite Christmas tradition took place in mid-December. A group of us would gather in the parking lot at Vandalia Presbyterian Church, and we'd be handed song sheets and Santa hats. Together, we made our way to the Village Green retirement home just a few miles away, and for about an hour we would walk the halls singing familiar carols. Some residents opened their doors; others closed theirs. Before leaving, we would always gather around that artificial tree in the center of the lobby, and some residents—maybe a dozen or so—would be brought into that space. Some would sing along; some were sleeping. Some were aware of what was happening; others had vacant stares. An unusual place to sing of new life and joy on the way. Perhaps. Except for this: the souls gathered in that space knew more about the tenacity of hope than any of the carolers. As a child, I remember watching their eyes with wonder. Their faces displayed the wisdom that only waiting can produce.

And so, nine months after the angelic encounter in the Temple, into a world overcome by despair, almost deaf to the voice of hope, a child was born. Despite family tradition, his parents named him John. Zechariah, who finally found his voice, was insistent on that. And then, the old priest speaks words of blessing for his firstborn son, words of blessing for a waiting world: "And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; 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 in the way of peace." The old man knew what he had been waiting for. He came to wake us up. To renew our expectation. To prepare us for what...or who...was coming. Mary's child. God's own son. Friends, it is Advent. For now, let all mortal flesh keep silence. Let every heart make room. Hope is on the way. Amen.