

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT: ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH



Luke 1

First Message

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SERIES: ADVENT 2020

Today is the first day of Advent, and so we lit the first candle on our Advent wreath. As the first Sunday of Advent, it is the first day of the Church Year, the liturgical calendar that much of the church has followed for some 1500 years.

Ancient Israel had a liturgical calendar, given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. At the heart of this calendar lay three annual feasts: Passover, *Shavuot* or Weeks, and *Sukkot* or Tabernacles. As Shawn has reminded us these past few weeks, these feasts were times for the people to remember their history, specifically to remember how God had brought the Israelites out of harsh slavery in Egypt, had led them through the wilderness, and had brought them into the Promised Land. Jews today still keep these three feasts, together with two more that were added later: Purim and Hanukkah, both of which celebrate God's miraculous deliverance of his people from attempted genocide or cultural genocide. Jews are a people who remember.

As followers of Jesus, and readers of the New Testament, we understand that these three feasts reached their fulfillment in Jesus. They are replaced by a single feast, the Lord's Supper, in which we remember our Lord's death until he come again. No other feasts are instituted in the New Testament. Nevertheless, within a few centuries the early church organized the year into a liturgical cycle: a liturgical calendar that remembers the events of Jesus' life, notably his birth, baptism, passion culminating in his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, followed by the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost. This calendar commemorates what God has done in Christ and what God is continuing to do now through his Spirit. It is a cycle that keeps us firmly anchored in redemptive history. It keeps us oriented onto God in Christ through his Spirit. Many are suspicious of liturgy. Yes, any liturgy can become rote and void of meaning. But, properly understood, liturgy can be orienting and deeply nourishing. It helps us remember. Christians, like Jews, are a people who remember.

PBCC is not a liturgical church, but we do pay attention to the church calendar a couple of times a year: at Christmas and Easter. Nearly every church does this much! For the past twenty years we have also paid attention to Advent, Palm Sunday and Good Friday. So today, on the first day of the liturgical year, as has become our custom, we are observing Advent. The liturgical cycle does not begin with the birth of Jesus; it does not begin with Christmas Day. It begins four Sundays earlier with Advent.

Advent is a season of waiting. It might seem odd to begin this way, with a season of waiting. Waiting is hard; it is inconvenient; it is unexciting; it is frustrating. Waiting is liminal time; it is in-between time; it seems like wasted time. Advent is also a season of longing, longing for God. The longing expressed in our opening hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel."

This year we are all in an extended season of waiting. It has already been a long wait and there's a lot more waiting ahead. We are waiting for the pandemic to be over. We are waiting for the vaccine, hopefully multiple vaccines, to be approved and become widely available.

And we are longing. We are longing to gather, to see one another face-to-face, to hug one another, to sit at a table together and share a meal. We are waiting and we are longing.

The season of Advent reminds us that the Jews had been waiting and they were longing. They had been waiting a long, long time, for many centuries. They were longing for God to do something. This longing is reflected in our readings this morning. First, in Psalm 80, our call to worship:

**How long, LORD God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people? (Ps 80:4 NIV)**

And the psalm's three-fold refrain:

**Restore us, LORD God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved. (80:3, 7, 19)**

Then in Isaiah 64, our Scripture reading:

**Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!...
For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
(Isa 64:1, 3 NIV)**

God had come down before. How much longer to wait before he would come down again?

Incidentally, these are the first two readings for today in the calendar of Advent readings that I prepare each year. You can find this calendar on our website.

The Jews responded in various ways to this prolonged waiting. The Sadducees grew tired of waiting. They turned to power and influence, entering into an unholy alliance with the Romans who occupied the land. They profited from this relationship, and so were not eager for the Lord to come. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were serious in their waiting. They lived lives of enhanced purity in the hope that they were preparing the way for God to come. The Essenes took this further: they retreated from society to live in the desert at an even higher purity level, free from contamination from other people. The Zealots had also become tired of waiting; they resorted to violence in the hope of overthrowing the Romans, doing God's work for him as it were. Finally there was the great mass of little people, just trying to survive. In our Advent series this year we will meet some of these little people.

Over these next four Sundays we will look at four pairs of people in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the shepherds and the Magi, and Simeon and Anna. Today we start with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke begins his gospel account of Jesus with this couple:

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were

both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7 ESV)

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were very old and were childless because Elizabeth was barren. In the ancient world barrenness was viewed as a curse, as a sign of God's disfavor. They would have suffered social stigma, shame and reproach for their childless condition. People would have whispered behind their back, wondering how they had sinned against God to suffer such a condition. But Luke assures us that they were both right with God: "they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." They were godly and devout in all their ways. They were devoted to the Lord. They were like the best of the Old Testament saints, notably Noah and Abraham of whom this language of being righteous and walking blamelessly is used. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been waiting a long time for a child, but now they were old. Was there still any hope? The Jews had been waiting a long time for God to come. Was there still any hope?

Zechariah was also a priest. A thousand years earlier, King David, as part of his preparations for Solomon to build the temple, had organized the priests into 24 divisions (1 Chr 24). These divisions took it in turns to serve in the temple for one week. Twice a year Zechariah would go up from his home to the temple in Jerusalem for a week of priestly duty. It was again his turn:

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. (1:8-10)

Central to the daily liturgy in the temple was the *tamid* offering twice each day. There were two altars. On each one an offering was to be made, morning and evening, regularly or continually (Heb. *tamid*). On the bronze altar of burnt offering in the courtyard a lamb was sacrificed (Exod 29:38-42). On the golden incense altar inside the Holy Place incense was burned (Exod 30:7-8). Two priests were chosen by lot to make these two offerings. The most important was the incense offering. This was the lot that fell to Zechariah on this particular day. No priest was ever chosen twice, and many priests were never chosen for this most important of all the priestly duties. So, when Zechariah was chosen by lot and entered the temple to burn incense before the Lord, this was the most important moment of his life. It was a very great honor and responsibility.

Throughout Scripture incense represents prayer. Zechariah stood at the incense altar, facing the veil that separated him from the Holy of Holies. The incense symbolized the prayers of the people, rising up to God. The temple was a house of prayer. It was the conduit to the very ears, eyes and heart of God in heaven. Those ears, eyes and heart were open to this place, and to the prayers of his people that were directed toward this place.

Morning and evening, day after day, week after week, year after year, a priest had stood there before God and burned incense on the altar, gathering the prayers of the people and presenting them to the Lord. What were they praying for? That the Lord would remember his people. That he would be faithful to the covenants he had made, to the oaths he had sworn to their forefathers. Had God heard? When would he respond? When would he come down? He had been

silent for centuries since the last prophets had spoken. It had been so long that perhaps some of the priests who stood there had given up hope and just went through the motions. But not Zechariah. Luke has characterized him as a model of piety and faithfulness. Now it was Zechariah's turn to stand at the altar and pray. O that the Lord would remember! This is the meaning of Zechariah's name: the LORD (Yahweh) remembers. O that the Lord would be faithful to what he had sworn! This is the meaning of his wife's name: Elizabeth, or in Hebrew Elisheba: my God has sworn. Would prayers for their own personal barrenness be mixed in with prayers concerning Israel's barrenness? Meanwhile, as Zechariah was praying inside, a great multitude of people outside was also praying. All were focused on God, their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. All were focused on God in hope: hope that he would be true to his promises; hope that he would come down and save his people.

As Zechariah offered up the prayers of himself and all the people on the rising smoke of the incense, a surprising thing happened:

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (1:11-17)

This time it was different! It had been a very long time since the Lord had sent an angel to earth as his messenger. Zechariah responded as all people in the Bible do when an angel appears: he was terrified. This is why "Fear not!" is the most common command in all of Scripture. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." This son was not just to reverse the barrenness of Elizabeth. She stands in a line of barren women in the Old Testament: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Manoah's wife and Hannah. God gave them sons not just to satisfy their personal desires for a son. God gave these sons to advance his saving purposes for his people. This son would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, thereby enabled to prepare a people for the Lord. Zechariah was to give him the name John, in Hebrew Johanan: "The LORD is gracious."

Despite his godly piety, Zechariah was incredulous:

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (1:18-20)

We should feel sympathy for Zechariah: when taken by surprise we don't always say the wisest things. "How shall I know? How can I be sure?" This was understandable: he and his wife were indeed old,

beyond the normal age for having children. Gabriel interpreted Zechariah's response as a lack of faith. There was biblical precedent. Again there is a connection to Abraham: he and Sarah were old, advanced in years when God finally gave them Isaac. Zechariah, as a son of Abraham, should have had the faith of Abraham. Gabriel gave him a sign so that he would know: he would be silent until the day of fulfillment. It becomes clear later in the chapter that this silence rendered him deaf as well as dumb. For the next nine months Zechariah would live in a world of silence.

Meanwhile, outside the temple, people were getting anxious:

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. (1:21-22)

Finally Zechariah came out and the service could continue. At this point in the service he had some important words to say. After another lot-chosen priest had arranged the slain lamb on the bronze altar, Zechariah was supposed to pronounce a blessing over all the priests, over all the worshipers in the temple courts, indeed over all Israel. Which blessing was he to pronounce? The priestly blessing, given by the Lord to Moses for Aaron to use in blessing the Lord's people, the blessing which Liviu in Romania sang so beautifully for us last Sunday:

**The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)**

But Zechariah was speechless. His gesticulations only emphasized his silence. The biggest moment in his life, and he couldn't talk! The one time in his life when he would put the Lord's name onto his people in blessing, and not a word would come. He couldn't say, "The LORD be gracious to you." But the Lord had been gracious to him: he was giving him a son named John, Johanan: "The LORD is gracious"! The Lord was being gracious to his people: this son would prepare the way.

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people." (1:23-25)

At the end of the week Zechariah went home. He was unable to tell Elizabeth what had happened, unable to answer, even hear, her questions. But soon she would have sensed a great difference. The unimaginable had happened: old beyond any possibility of conception, she was now pregnant. For five months she stayed hidden. Rather than rushing out to tell the neighbors, she poured out her heart to the Lord in praise. He had seen her! He had taken notice of her. He had remembered her. He had removed her reproach, taken away her shame.

Five months later the angel Gabriel appeared again, this time to Mary in Nazareth. He announced that she too would bear a son. Like Zechariah, Mary responded with a question, and Gabriel gave her also a sign: her aged relative Elizabeth was now in her sixth month of pregnancy, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37). Yet another connection to Abraham who had been told the

same thing: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14).

Mary hurried off to visit Elizabeth, a scene we know as the Visitation. Gabriel had told Zechariah that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb. At the sound of Mary's arrival the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Empowered by the Spirit, he recognized the arrival of Mary and of the one whose way he would prepare. Elizabeth, too, was filled with the Spirit and pronounced a blessing on mother and child. For three months these two women, each miraculously pregnant with a son, stayed together, hidden in Elizabeth's home. Then Mary went home.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. (1:57-63)

Since Elizabeth had hidden herself the neighbors presumably had not known she was pregnant. But as soon as the baby was born they heard and rushed to rejoice with her. Eight days later, Zechariah and Elizabeth, as faithful Jews, prepared to circumcise the child. The neighbors assumed his name would be Zechariah like his father. But Elizabeth overruled them, insisting he be called John, even though there was no precedent in the family. The father confirmed this surprising choice. Only then, after nine months, was his silence lifted.

And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

**"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people." (1:64-68)**

Like his son and his wife, it was now Zechariah's turn to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The first words out of his mouth were words of praise to God. The neighbors asked, "What then will this child be?" Zechariah knew, for Gabriel had revealed it to him in the temple. So Zechariah poured forth the prophecy we know as the *Benedictus*, praising God that he had visited his people, that he had remembered his covenant. Zechariah and Elizabeth indeed; their names were true: the Lord their God had remembered the oath he had sworn.

Luke has portrayed Zechariah and Elizabeth as model Jews after the pattern of Abraham. They were godly and devout, devoted to the Lord. They are models also of those whom Jesus exalts in the first beatitude, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:3)

Who are the poor in spirit? The psalter contains the cry of the "poor and needy." Originally these were those who were materially poor, often as the result of oppression by the rich and the powerful. It then came to mean those who were spiritually poor, who rec-

ognized their need for God, who looked to him; those who longed for God and were waiting for him. These are the people that Jesus holds up for emulation. They are living the lifestyle of the kingdom of heaven, where God's will is done. Jesus pronounces them "blessed." Now we might be confused, because it looks as though the Lord's blessing is not on them. But the word "blessed" here really means that they are flourishing. They are like the person of Psalm 1 who is flourishing like a tree planted by streams of water. Jesus pronounces them to be flourishing, though the world might think otherwise. What the poor are looking for is God himself; what they are longing for is to be with God. Such were Zechariah and Elizabeth, who remained faithful and devoted to God in their many years of waiting. Such also were others in Luke's infancy narrative: Mary, Simeon and Anna, about whom we'll hear in weeks to come. Each week we will also consider these people in the light of one of the beatitudes. These were the little people, unnoticed by the powers that be, but noticed by God. In their waiting they had hope, for they were expectant for God to act. God saw them and remembered them. In the honor-shame society of the Ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world there was no honor in being poor in spirit; it was not a virtue. But these are the people whom Jesus honors, for they belong and flourish in God's kingdom.

We are in a season of waiting, but this is a momentary blip in a much larger in-between time: between the ascension of Jesus and his return in glory, his Second Coming. This too is remembered at Advent: we look ahead to the second advent of our Lord. How should we live in this in-between time? This in-between time of the pandemic, and, more generally, the in-between time between the two comings of our Lord. The final significant event in the liturgical calendar is Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit, ten days after the Ascension in which the risen Jesus entered into the Father's very presence. On the day of Pentecost, God sent his Spirit down upon people and the church was born. The beautiful hymn that James sang as the offertory, *Come Down, O Love Divine*, is usually sung at Pentecost. God, who came down in human form at Christmas, has again come down as the Spirit. In the liturgical calendar Pentecost is the last significant event that is remembered. But there are still five or six

months before Advent comes round again. This in-between time is known as Ordinary Time. This seems boring, just a time of waiting for the calendar to turn over again at Advent. But it is Pentecost that makes sense of this Ordinary Time. God who was at work through Jesus whom he sent into the world continues to be at work through his Spirit whom he has sent into the world. We live out our "ordinary" lives with God's extraordinary Presence in and among us: the abiding and empowering Presence of his Spirit. Therefore, this is not waste time. It is in-between time, but it is most definitely not waste time. God is at work in us and through us by the Holy Spirit, his empowering presence, enabling us to live lives that are pleasing to him. During this time of waiting for the pandemic to be over, waiting to get back to "normal," God is at work creating opportunities for us to walk in his ways. May we have eyes to see these opportunities. May we be a faithful presence, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth were a faithful presence in their long years of waiting. Empowered by God's Spirit, may we love God and love neighbor.

God's ears, eyes and heart are more open than ever: open not to the temple where Zechariah prayed, but to his beloved Son who has passed through the veil into his very presence. And so we pray in Jesus' name, knowing that our prayers are heard. We can pray that God will give us wisdom to live life in this season of waiting. We can pray that God, through his Spirit, will intensify our desire and longing for him. Because of Jesus at his right hand, God sees us and God remembers us during the in-between time of this pandemic, and the much longer in-between time till our Lord come again. At Advent we remember: we remember that God remembers and that he is faithful.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

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