

Expecting the Unexpected: Zechariah
1st Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2009

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

God's surprising ways can leave us speechless! That's exactly what happened to a priest named Zechariah. If his story doesn't sound familiar, well- it never comes up as a lectionary reading. Every Advent, we do hear the story of Zechariah's son-John the Baptist, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

John prepared the people's hearts through a baptism of repentance and forgiveness to receive the coming Messiah. That's the familiar story we know from Advent each year.

Zechariah is someone who was taken by complete surprise, finding himself a part of God's plan, finding himself so close to the epicenter of the Messiah's coming. Zechariah's story can teach us to live with a faith open to God in us and in our world, to live with a faith ready to expect the unexpected.

What do we know about Zechariah? Luke wants us to know that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were folks in good standing. They had a godly heritage, both from the line of Aaron, Moses' brother, both families from the priestly order. They were religious, obedient, and righteous people, observing all the laws and commandments of the Lord. Luke tells us they remained so **despite** living with something in their lives that was difficult for them...a circumstance which left in their minds unanswered questions, and sadness.

What else do we know about Zechariah? Luke tells us he was a priest who served in the Jerusalem Temple, a key to the whole setting of this story. Religious workers in Israel were divided into two groups, priests and Levites. All were descended from the Tribe of Levi, but additionally, the descendants of Aaron were set apart for special ministry in the Temple. Since King David's time, a regular schedule had been established- like Ken Turnquist schedules our assisting ministers. The priests were divided into 24 divisions; Zechariah's division was eighth in rotation. I think Bruce Baker is 8th in our rotation of Assisting Ministers if that helps us related better to the story!

"Zechariah was chosen **by lot** to enter the Sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense." What does that mean? Each day, about 50 priests would have been performing all different duties at the Temple, but only one was selected, by lottery, to be the officiating priest, and there were so many priests that you only got to do this once in your lifetime! This was the day of Zechariah's once in a lifetime turn to be officiating priest! He would enter the inner chambers of the Temple, right up to the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies. There at the Altar of Incense, it was his duty to burn the incense, and offer prayers for the deliverance of all Israel.

It's a compelling picture of this man, Zechariah. A man of God who persisted in his walk of faith, who kept doing the things expected of him despite that circumstance in his life, that perhaps, had left him feeling passed over in life, with not much left to look forward to. But suddenly, he received this stunning honor to be the officiating priest in the Jerusalem Temple.

It's a compelling picture too because here's Zechariah, supposed to pray for the whole people of Israel, but I wonder. Did Zechariah still believe God was listening? That God answered prayers. He and Elizabeth must have given up praying for that circumstance in their life long ago. Have you ever done that? Prayed a long time about something, and then finally, give that prayer up?

But just as he had faithfully and obediently fulfilled all that the Lord required of him, Zechariah prayed for the people of Israel, for their deliverance.

Being officiating priest for a day would give anyone stomach flutters- just ask our Assisting Ministers. But imagine, incense smoke billowing up all around Zechariah, and through it, appeared an angel. Zechariah shook with fear! And the angel answered with what angels always say to mortals- “Don’t be afraid!”

This angel said to Zechariah, “**Don’t be afraid anymore –your prayer has been heard!**”

Which prayer? I had to read the angel’s declaration several times, because it confused me. Zechariah was serving in a public capacity but the angel announced his personal prayer was heard, regarding that circumstance.

First, God answered Zechariah and Elizabeth’s personal prayer, for a child.

Second, God answered Zechariah’s official prayer for the deliverance of Israel, because their child would announce the arrival of the Messiah come to save. The angel’s words filled Zechariah’s ears with wonder upon wonder!

Elizabeth will bear you a son.

You will have joy and gladness again- MANY will rejoice at his birth.

His whole life will be set apart in holiness.

He will be a prophet the likes of Elijah!

He will be God’s instrument for turning the hearts of the people.

And next came the learning part of the story- a learning not only for Zechariah, but all of us.

Zechariah didn’t believe it.

What I imagine Zechariah thinking was “Now? Aren’t you a bit late?”

What he said was, “I am an old man. My wife is past child-bearing. How will I know this is so?”

At least we can say that Zechariah’s reaction put him in good company.

We’ve been studying Abraham and Sarah in confirmation classes. When God promised to give Abraham a land to possess, Abraham asked, “How am I to know this?” Abraham and Sarah laughed when the Lord announced that they who were advanced in age would bear a child. Despite their disbelieving questions, God still fulfilled the promises he made.

On this day, God answered three prayers for Zechariah. You know the saying, “Be careful what you pray for.” When Zechariah asked the angel for a sign, he got one. He was silenced, for calling into question the words announced by the archangel Gabriel who flew from the very presence of God to the Temple to tell Zechariah this news. Zechariah was made speechless for months, until the fulfillment of those words of promise.

In essence, Zechariah put limits on what he expected God could do. Expecting the unexpected means living with an edge to our faith. Zechariah had lost that edge-iness. Do you know what I mean by edge-iness?

It’s a daring quality. It’s being in a state of readiness. Edginess can push the limits of what we believe is possible. There’s even a sense of danger, of sitting on the edge of a precipice. Over Thanksgiving I saw a picture hanging in my mother in law’s kitchen: there is Ellen Chiles sitting on a rocky outcrop with the Grand Canyon panorama behind her. How many of you have seen a picture like this?

The opposite of being on the edge, is being on a ledge; a ledge is comfortable and safe. We could say the point of today’s story about Zechariah is to get off the ledge and sit on the edge! Live with an edge-y quality to our faith. Expect something unexpected about how God is at work right now in you and in the world.

I love that this story teaches us to not place limits on God; and I love as much that it also teaches us that God does not limit our usefulness to Him. Think of Zechariah's view of himself and Elizabeth. He said, "I am an old man. Elizabeth is not able."

We also engage in limiting beliefs and statements about ourselves and God. Next time, don't question God, but question the veracity of those statements we make. God doesn't limit our usefulness to Him and to serving His purposes. That's good news for all of us!

Live with a faith that expects the unexpected. This has some important consequences. Consider this...if we are controlled by ledge-iness instead of edge-iness, if we worship a limited God, our witness will also be limited. The stories we have to tell others about God will be small and limited. Zechariah's unbelief literally silenced his witness. Luke tells us there was a whole multitude of people waiting outside the Temple, waiting to hear from Zechariah...was God still there? Did God answer his prayers on their behalf? Did He still favor Israel? And Zechariah was silent!

And our unbelief will silence the witness we could tell. There are people waiting and longing and hoping for good news around us, hoping for salvation to enter their lives. Christ's coming is a continual coming into our hearts and lives- Advent and Christmas aren't about just celebrating the birth of the Savior; it is about His continual coming to us. And someone is waiting for Him to come into their life; someone who may feel life has passed them by, or has given up praying, or no longer feels useful to anyone, or is living with a difficult circumstance in their life. Like the challenges Zechariah and Elizabeth faced.

God has good news for them, and He's given you to tell it. To be the herald of good news.

This Advent, when we are thinking of John the Baptist who prepared peoples hearts for the coming of Christ, how surprising to realize we can prepare the way of the Lord through the stories and witness we can share about God in us and in our world. Zechariah shows us this is true; and reminds us to live with a faith that expects the unexpected. Amen.