

**3 Advent
December 12, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus
And the power of God known in the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Once again, we hear John the Baptist ... John the curmudgeonly Baptist. This week he is shouting at the people who have come all the way out into the wilderness to hear him preach. John the Baptist is mentioned in all four of the canonical gospels. Where did he come from? What is his story?

A little background and context might be helpful. Of the four canonical gospels ... Matthew Mark, Luke, and John ... only two of them have stories about the birth of Jesus ... Matthew and Luke. However, the story in Matthew is very different from the story in Luke, and most Nativity scenes we see are actually a compilation of the two ... the manger scene from Luke's story, and the Three Wise Men from Matthew's story. Anyhow, for the time being, let me focus on Luke's story.

In Luke's gospel the birth of Jesus happens in the second chapter. If this story is really about Jesus, why wait until the second chapter to start the story? Well, it is because the first chapter of Luke's story is really about the birth of John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah ... the one who was to become known as John the Baptist. Luke's gospel is the only one to give us this background.

As the story opens in Luke's gospel, Zechariah is a Jewish priest in the hill country of Judea, north of Jerusalem. Luke tells us that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were "getting on in years." They were "righteous" people, yet they were childless ... and the author of Luke's gospel pins the problem on Elizabeth ... Luke says she was "barren."

They had all but given up hope when Zechariah's priestly "section" was called up to serve at the Temple in Jerusalem. Essentially the group of Jewish priests of which Zechariah was a part were sent to fill in as the "Altar Guild" at the Temple for several months. During Zechariah's tour of duty in the Temple the annual cleaning of the Holy of Holies came due, and Zechariah was chosen "by lot" to be the one to enter this most sacred of spaces to clean up the dust and cobwebs and offer incense at the Altar. This was a big deal ... a very big deal. Remember, the Holy of Holies was where the Ten Commandments would have resided if they had not disappeared during the Babylonian Exile. Yet the Holy of Holies was still believed to be the abode of God.

So, Zechariah is in the Holy of Holies going about his business ... and the archangel Gabriel appears. Obviously, this was a startling event, but Gabriel tells Zechariah, "Do not be afraid." Gabriel then tells Zechariah that his prayers ... and the prayers of Elizabeth ... were going to be

answered. Even in their old age they would have a son, and Gabriel told Zechariah that his name would be “John.”

However, Zechariah was somewhat skeptical and says, “How can this be?” At this point the archangel Gabriel is offended by Zechariah’s hesitancy to believe the angel’s words, so he strikes him “dumb,” meaning that Zechariah could not speak ... Gabriel took his voice from him.

Well ... as you might imagine ... there was a lot of confusion as Zechariah left the Holy of Holies, and he can only gesture wildly to the other priests outside since cannot speak. No one is really sure what happened in the Holy of Holies, but whatever it was it took Zechariah’s ability to speak. Then, when Zechariah’s tour of duty was up, he and Elizabeth return to their home in the hill country, and lo and behold, in due time Elizabeth became pregnant.

At this point there is a little twist in the story ... Luke introduces another character ... Mary ... and Luke tells about her encounter with the archangel Gabriel. Gabriel says to Mary ... just like he said to Zechariah ... “Do not be afraid.” Then Gabriel tells Mary that she will have a child ... a holy child ... and that she will name him Jesus. This is the Annunciation. (But why is it that whenever the archangel Gabriel encounters someone the first words from his lips are “Do not be afraid.?”)

Luke now tells us that Mary, now pregnant with Jesus, goes to visit her relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah. As Mary walks into the house the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumps, and Elizabeth recognizes that the child that Mary is carrying is indeed holy.

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, says to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

At that point Mary sings a song ... the same song we sing each Sunday in Advent as the Hymn of Praise ... the Song of Mary ... The Magnificat.

The first chapter of Luke’s gospel ends with the birth of Elizabeth’s baby son. Eight days after his birth, when her son was to be circumcised, and given a name, she says that he should be called John. Her friends and relatives were confused because no one in Elizabeth’s family or Zechariah’s family was named John. So, the friends and relatives turn to Zechariah ... who cannot speak ... and give him a tablet and something to write with. Zechariah writes, “His name is John.”

With that Zechariah could now speak, and he speak he did! He recites a prophesy about his Son, John, and how John will “go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” This is the canticle, The Song of Zechariah that we recited last week instead of a Psalm.

The first chapter of Luke’s gospel ends with, “The child ... [John] ... grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.”

Now, why did Luke choose to begin his writing about Jesus with this story. Does the plight of Elizabeth and Zechariah ... childless in their old age ... bring to mind any other story in the Bible that you can think of? Why might Luke want people to be reminded of that story as they begin listening to the story about Jesus? And this Song of Mary sounds an awful lot like a song that Hannah sang way back in the Book of First Samuel. I wonder why?

Okay, enough of that. John eventually did "appear publicly to Israel" ... and great crowds streamed into the desert to get yelled at by John. The question is "Why?" Why were they willing ... even eager ... to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? What attracted them?

Last week I preached about John the Baptist ... and here he is again ... John the curmudgeonly Baptist. On this Third Sunday of Advent it seems as if John the Baptist is the bearded killjoy of Christmas. "You brood of vipers!" he shouted across the wilderness "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

I believe the first clue to why people flocked to John the Baptist in the wilderness lies in the question they asked John at the conclusion of his sermon. "What should we do?" That's not a question people ask when things are going well. It's the question we ask when we are facing overwhelming challenges. This is the question we ask when the received wisdom has failed, when our cherished defenses are down, when our lives are splitting at the seams ... when we are confused and fearful. It's what we ask when we're weary, bored, disillusioned, or desperate. "What should we do?" How many of us asked that question ... over and over again ... during this pandemic?

John's answer also provides our second clue. Imagine him if you will ... a wild beast of a man, dressed in camel's hair and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey. The description of John's very appearance tells us that he is someone who lives on the margins of society ... geographically and otherwise. John was a figurative and literal outlier. What did the crowds think such a fringe character would say in answer to their question? Abandon your homes and families? Dwell in the desert? Reject your culture? Start a revolution?

Given John's demeanor, my guess is that the crowds might very well have expected such radicalism. But the answer he gave them was even more radical ... so radical we stand in danger of missing it: What should you do? You should go home.

Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your colleagues. Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is somewhere else, somewhere far away from the grit and sweat of your nights and days. Stop looking in churches and at holy people to give you the answer. Instead, inhabit the stuff of your lives as deeply and as generously as you can. Your messiah is closer than you think. Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous. Why? Because the holy ground that matters most is the ground right beneath your feet.

To the tax collectors, he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the mercenaries: "Don't extort money by threats or false accusations; be satisfied with your wages." To the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Don't allow your religious heritage to make you arrogant or complacent." To everyone who had anything he told them, "You have gifts to give. So, share them."

What John was daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the ethereal and mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for a life in God's image are embedded in the lives God has already given us. We don't have to look "out there." The kingdom of heaven is here, within and among us.

If this is true then we have work to do ... work so ordinary, it will probably disappoint us.

Remember, we are supposed to call John's exhortation "good news" ... that is what the word "gospel" means. In fact, I think it can be "good news." If you're one who believes that your life ... your family, your heritage, your vocation, your future ... is somehow outside the realm of God ... then what John has to say can be good news indeed. It says God is right here ... intimately close. John is saying that the messiah is coming, but get ready for it by finding the holy and sacred in your own life ... in everything you do ... everywhere you go. Everything in your life matters to God. Nothing in it is beyond redemption ... nothing ... not-a-thing.

On the other hand, if your tendency is to ignore the exhortation, or discount it, or run away from it ... if the life you have is not the life you want or even want to want ... then John's good news might feel like something stabbing your soul. To tell the truth, I come to this passage with some ambivalence. I feel relief on the one hand, but I also feel sorrow. Some days, I'm ready to inhabit my life in the ways John suggests. Some days, all I want to do is run. However, the truth is that I have to give up who I have been so that I can become who I am.

As we anticipate the birth of Jesus, the one we Christians call the Anointed One ... the Messiah ... how is it that we prepare for the birth of holiness within our own lives. It is easy to celebrate the holiday as an event out there ... something that happened in the past ... something that was done for us as if we are passive observers ... but to do so misses the point.

If the messiah is to come alive in this world, he/she will come alive in each of us when we feed the hungry ... those who hunger for nourishment of their bodies and nourishment for their souls. The messiah will come alive in us when we cloth the naked ... those who are vulnerable to the physical weather and the weather of our society. The messiah will come alive in us when we give drink to those who are thirsty, and visit those in prisons of all kinds, and when we welcome the stranger ... especially those who have been marginalized, and disenfranchised, and discarded by the world.

In almost two weeks we will celebrate the birth of Jesus as the Anointed One ... the Messiah of our faith. John the Baptist is announcing that event ... but he is doing it by telling the people

they have to prepare. They have to prepare by realizing that the joy they will know comes with the price of living life from the holiness that is within all of us. This is the God that is alive in Jesus. It is also the God that is alive in each one of us ... just waiting to be born.

Open your hearts to the messiah that is within you ... something new just might be born in you this Christmas.

Amen