

Upside Down
8:15 am Advent 4 "Love"
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras December 20, 2015

Luke 1:5-13, 57-80

Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth came from a family of priests. They accepted the presence of God the way they accepted the presence of the ground under their feet. They talked to God daily, read the scriptures, they were good church people.

Now, I know a lot of you may spend some time this holiday season with relatives that don't quite see eye to eye with you on matters of faith and politics. And they might question the sincerity of your Christianity based upon your voting record. And you may want to walk out on those loved ones, but you won't.

I know you. I see you week after week here in our worshipping community when you could be at home in bed. I see you here on weeknights for committee meetings, when you could have your feet up on the couch after a long day. And I know that you care about the hurting when I see you feed people at St. Georges, buy gifts for children in care of DCF or visit shut-ins. And as far as I am concerned, that is what it means to keep the Christ in Christmas.

So while you may not have come from a long line of preacher-types like Zechariah and Elizabeth, you too are good church people. And the thing about good church people is that we are used to coming to worship. It becomes a habit - a good one, one that I would encourage - but a habit nonetheless. Sometimes good church people fall into the trap of going through the motions, or dwelling in the details, rather than living each worship experience fully and expectantly.

But worship wasn't like that for Zechariah. There were so many priests in his day that he only had to cover worship two weeks out of the year; so working his shift was a big deal, something that he really looked forward to. In addition, offering incense in the temple was a particular privilege that he could only hope to do once in his lifetime. So, for Zechariah, this is not exactly a typical Sunday morning worship service. No one told him that he would be the grand finale of the Advent story. All they told him was to report for duty.

As out of the ordinary as the experience was, he was not really expecting to encounter something so bizarre on his watch. When the angel showed up, Zechariah was gripped with fear. After he heard what the angel had to say, he doubted.

Many who preach on this story tell their listeners they must not be afraid like Zechariah. They must not be doubters like Zechariah. But I'm not going to tell you that. Fear and doubt seem to me to be very human responses to something so amazing.

For one thing, who among us can control whether they are scared or not? However much pulpit-pounding I might do, if a huge, winged creature floats down into your kitchen this afternoon, you will be afraid.

And who has the ability to simply will themselves out of doubt? If you doubt, you doubt. It's a healthy reaction and not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is mindless fanaticism. A mindless, uncritical acceptance of religious authority is the real enemy. Our way of life is threatened not by skeptics but by true believers who insist that they have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (and woe to anyone who chooses a different path). And I don't think I can preach your doubt away.

Even good church folk like you and Zechariah are entitled to fear and doubt should the world-turning presence of God show up. Because things like that just don't happen. Angels don't show up at church. Post-menopausal women do not get pregnant. Illness doesn't disappear with the touch of a hand, no matter how much we will it away.

When God directly encounters the world, things have a way of getting turned upside down. We remember that in his life and ministry Jesus had a habit of turning everything on its head: personal relationships, power structures, our notions of what is holy and what is profane, even the reality of life and death. Zechariah's story is just the beginning of the upheaval.

He and Elizabeth were elderly when the angel told him they would be parents, way past the age of your average card carrying AARP member. Certainly, they weren't the first to experience the heartbreak of infertility. And they won't be the last.

The story seems vaguely familiar: a faithful couple, too old to bear children, lives with an impossible hope and promise that a child will change their world; theirs and everyone else's. And it all begins with a visit from a mysterious messenger who tells them the impossible is possible; the thing they thought couldn't happen is going to happen.

Maybe you recall this past fall when we dug into another story: Abraham and Sarah. The impossible became possible and they became living proof of God's willingness to make all things new. In spite of the fact that

they were “*getting on in years*,” they too had a child and that child was part of God’s movement to change the world.

As Advent slowly gives way to the next part of the story, doesn’t it strike you as interesting that we’ve got a string of scripture that seem to point us in the same direction:

- People hoping for better days,
- People dreaming of new things to come,
- People on the verge of a new year scanning their horizon for a reminder that God really does make all things new.

Perhaps we can look at Zechariah’s sudden muteness in another light. Rather than punishment for doubting, I wonder if those nine months that he could not speak were a gift from God; a forced season of contemplation; a time when he, the priest, could not speak the blessing and so must only receive it; a time when he could not speak so he must only listen. All preachers—no, make that all good church people—should have such a punishment!

Sometimes God surrounds our fears and doubts with a period of grace filled silence. And if we choose to enter into the silence we will be blessed by it. The shocking, provocative, revolutionary, subversive, counterintuitive good news for us today is that in our moments of greatest despair, weakness, frustration and helplessness, God meets us in that impossibly pregnant place, and announces, “*It will all be set right again soon.*”

We desperately need to hear that Good News. Especially now, when it seems that the whole world is hell bent on self-destruction.

- From the nit-picking and compromises of the World Climate Change Conference;
- to the amplitude of death and mass destruction through gun violence;
- to the scary thought that extremist views are pervading the world, giving voice to hatred, racism and bigotry...

Yes, the world is a frightening place. We need to know that it is not all darkness; it is not all hopeless. Proclaim it from the rooftops: God’s dawning light will shine in our darkest hour, and guide our feet onto the ways of peace. The time is now.

When his son is born, Zechariah is again able to speak, breaking the silence of 400 years between the time of prophets, and the new promise of Emmanuel, “God with us”. His questions and fears and doubts have been transformed into a hymn: “*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because God has come and has redeemed the people.*”

In time, Zechariah believed God's promises; even though he knew he would never live to see his son grow up. John the Baptist would be a prophet of God; he would have a special task, to prepare the way, to declare that hope and peace, joy and love would finally, at long last, be placed at the center by the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. May that be so, and may it be soon. Amen.