

WHEN THE CLERGY HAVE NOTHING TO SAY

Sermon, December 5, 2021

Second Sunday of Advent

Texts: Selections from Luke 1, Philipians 1:3-11

As I've noted in past years, we have in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel the four original Christmas carols: We have Mary's Song -- the Magnificat -- sung after she was greeted by her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. We have Zechariah's Song -- the Benedictus -- sung by Elizabeth's husband, the priest Zechariah, after the birth of their son, John ... after which our previous hymn was modeled. We have the Angel's Song -- the Gloria -- as the angels proclaimed, "*Gloria in Excelsis Deo (Glory to God in the Highest)*" on the night of Jesus' birth. Finally, we have Simeon's Song,-- the Nunc Dimittis -- after the elderly Simeon saw the baby Jesus in the temple and sang, "*Lord, now dismiss Your servant in peace.*" The Magnificat comes to us in Luke 1:46-55, the Benedictus comes twelve verses later in Luke 1:67-79; the Gloria and the Nunc Dimittus come in Luke's next chapter.

After Mary's angelic encounter with Gabriel informing her of her impending miraculous motherhood (*which we'll look at next week*), Luke tells us Mary rushed off to see her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was herself in her sixth month of pregnancy. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she exclaimed, "*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!*" Personally, I believe she said that last part loud enough so her husband back in the house would hear, as in "*Ahem! Blessed is she WHO HAS BELIEVED THAT WHAT THE LORD HAS SAID TO HER will be accomplished!*" And I think her unspoken words were, "... *unlike someone else I know!*" But I'm getting ahead of myself a bit.

We didn't read all of chapter one, but let me summarize some of the background information contained there. Elizabeth's husband was Zechariah the priest. We are told that both were "well along in years." Both came from respected families. Elizabeth was also a daughter of a priest, both Elizabeth and Zechariah traced their lineage all the way back to Moses' brother Aaron (*referring to last week's sermon, I'll point out that both had Levi's genes*). Up to this point of their lives they have been unable to have children. The priests of Israel were divided into twenty-four orders, each order is assigned a one week period of service in the temple twice each year, and Zechariah's order was on duty this week. In Luke 1:9, we are told Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the holy place of the temple to offer prayers and burn incense ... we know from other historical sources this was a privilege granted just once in a lifetime to any particular priest. Zechariah knew this would be a high point of his priestly career; he just didn't know how high!

We are then told that as he entered the holy place and began his duties, the archangel Gabriel appeared, right there at the altar of incense, and that Zechariah was "... *startled and was gripped with fear.*" And the angel said what angels always say when people encounter them and are scared out of their wits: "**Don't be afraid.**" "*Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you are to give him the name 'John.'*" Zechariah responds in the words of the 60's rock band, the Young Rascals¹ "How Can I Be Sure?" "*How can I be sure? I'm an old man, and my wife is well along in years.*"

The angel answered, in so many words, "*I am Gabriel! I am the angel who stands in the presence of God! And God sent me here to speak to you, Zechariah, to give you His message! I have been sent to tell you this good news. And because you did not believe my words (which are really God's words), you will be silent and not able to speak, until the day this all comes to pass.*" And Zechariah is struck dumb on the spot. You might say he was literally scared speechless. Some commentators I've read said this is a fitting and appropriate chastisement for Zechariah's doubt and/or skepticism ... after all, Zechariah IS a member of the clergy, and a member of the clergy who does not believe God's words really has nothing of any substance to say to anyone else, anyway, so shut him up and get him out of the pulpit! Zechariah is given about nine months to shut up, be quiet and learn something about what belief in God and His word is all about, a lesson Zechariah will be learning in compelled silence.

Now, it was the custom for the priest after being in the holy place to walk out to the people and give a benediction. But Zechariah could not bless the people. Not yet, anyway. As a bit of a related side note,

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuKeSUUK-A4>

some wonder why Mary got off somewhat easy as compared to Zechariah. After all, both Mary and Zechariah were visited by the same angel. After Gabriel visited Mary and gave her this message from God, she also questioned, "How can this be?" So, why wasn't she struck dumb as well? Well, a couple of things, admittedly speculation: Zechariah is much older, Mary's much younger ... and maybe more is expected from us older grownups, those of us who have been around the center of worship more than a few years. Also, Zechariah is a priest; and he of all people should know there is biblical precedent for miraculous births from older women who were thought to be unable to have children. After all, the entire Jewish race began with a miraculous birth by an old woman named Sarah, a woman who, like Zechariah's wife, was well past the usual age of childbearing. Both Abraham and Sarah were well advanced in years when little Isaac came long. We see it again years later in Isaac wife's Rebekah (*who gave birth to twins Jacob and Esau in her old age*), Jacob's wife Rachel (*who was long thought to be barren before giving birth to Joseph and Benjamin*), Elkanah's wife Hannah (*who gave birth to the prophet Samuel*) ... all were women thought to be unable to bear children. But, in Mary's defense, there was NO historical or biblical precedent for a *virgin* giving birth! Mary most likely asked "*How can this be?*" because she knew enough to know this has never, ever happened before, and she is most likely asking in a spirit of wonder, rather than one of skepticism ... which shows in her final reply, "*I am the Lord's servant; let it be unto me as you have said.*" So, even though there is no historical precedent, Mary still believes what God has to say through Gabriel. She believes, trusts, responds to and acts upon the truth of God's word.

Now, let's go back to that scene of Elizabeth and Mary meeting, and Elizabeth telling Mary the baby leaped for joy inside her, and Elizabeth saying, "*Blessed is SHE WHO HAS BELIEVED THAT WHAT THE LORD HAS SAID TO HER will be accomplished!*" probably halfway over her shoulder and loud enough for her helpless-to-respond husband to overhear back in the house. This may be reading too much between the lines, but maybe this daughter and wife of a priest is intimating to her (literally) dumb husband, "*If only you had believed God's word in the first place! Things would have been a whole lot easier for you and everyone else who has to live with you!*" If only all of us listened to God and believed His Word in the first place in all things ... how much better off all of us would have been, as well as how much better things would have been for all those who live with us and all whose lives we've touched. But, that's another sermon.

Nine months later, after the child was born, and everybody apparently wanted to give him a family name like Zechariah Junior, Zechariah used his hands to ask for a tablet and he wrote down the words, "HIS NAME IS JOHN." That was the name the angel told him nine months earlier to give this son. With that act of obedience, Zechariah's tongue was released, and the first thing he did with his re-found voice was sing the second carol of Christmas, the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah. By the way, the name John means "God is gracious." Zechariah now saw the loving graciousness of God in the flesh, and held that enfleshed grace in his arms. He experienced that grace first hand. He now believed what the Lord had said, and put that belief into obedient practice ... so now he is a member of the clergy who has something to say that's worth saying AND worth hearing! He now has a *genuine* blessing, a **BENEDICTUS**, to give.

One final thought: The first verse of his Benedictus is, "*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed His people.*" Now, wait a minute. Baby John is only eight days old, and baby Jesus hasn't even born yet. What do you mean, "God HAS redeemed his people?" The work hasn't been completed yet, has it? I mean, this is all just getting started! Well, again, Zechariah has just spend nine months learning in silence that (a) **God means what He says**, and (b) **God will finish what He starts**. Zechariah is now confident of the promises of God; Zechariah now believes God means what He says, Zechariah now has something of substance to say, Zechariah now has a blessing to give and Zechariah now makes abundantly clear that God will finish what He starts. He so believes it that he puts this in the past tense as if it's already been done, because He knows God WILL finish this. He knows God is as good as His Word. Now, that's a member of the clergy who has something to say. We have the sure and certain hope God will bring to full completion the salvation and redemption of this world He so loved so much that He sent his only begotten Son in the first place. *God will finish what He started*; that is true for you and that is true for all creation. God follows through. God keeps His commitments. God makes good on His intentions. God always finishes what He starts.

That's why Paul writes to the Philippians: "*I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the Day of Jesus Christ.*" Nobody knows when that Day will come, but it will come! And the sooner we cooperate with His good work in us, the sooner we believe what God says and put it into obedient practice, the better off all of us will be.

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed His people." Amen