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Sierra Pines United Methodist Church
Sermon: 12/23/2018
Series: Anticipation
Scripture: Luke 1:57-80



Great Expectations



Over the last few weeks, we have been reading the first chapter of Luke, as we've been waiting with anticipation for the birth of Jesus and God coming amongst us.

But there are **two stories** of promised babies in Luke. As well as the foretelling of the birth of Jesus, there is also the birth of John, who we know as John the Baptist. John's parents are an older couple, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a relative of Mary's.

We have already heard the story of how an angel appeared to Zechariah, while he was in the Temple making an incense offering and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a baby. When Zechariah asked the angel, *How will I know that this is so?* he was struck mute.

And we also heard that Elizabeth did indeed become pregnant, and that she and the also pregnant Mary spent some time together encouraging each other. Indeed, when they met, Elizabeth's baby jumped for joy in her womb.

Let's listen to what happens next in the first half of our scripture for this morning.

< Luke 1:57-66 >

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.

60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John."

61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name."

62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.

63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John."

And all of them were amazed.

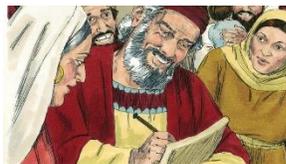
⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea.

⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said,

“What then will this child become?”

For, indeed, the **hand of the Lord** was with him.



As you heard, Elizabeth gave birth to son, and then as good Jews, and according to Mosaic Law (Law of Moses) Elizabeth & Zechariah took their baby to the synagogue to be circumcised when he was eight days old. The guests expected the baby to be named after his father. But with Zechariah still struck mute, and going against tradition, Elizabeth tells them that the baby’s name is John, which is the name that the angel had told Zechariah to give their baby. Of course, the congregation are not going to trust her and take a woman’s word! And so, they ask Zechariah, who confirms Elizabeth’s word by writing the name John on a tablet, and he then immediately receives his voice back and begins to speak, praising God.

The people are amazed and fear-filled. And all who heard pondered the question: **“What then will this child become?”** Or we might ask, **What is God up to in all of this?**

We have the hindsight now of knowing that this baby grew up to be the prophet John the Baptist, who ministered in the desert and baptized Jesus and told everyone that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But, all that people could see at the time was a miracle baby who was born to a barren couple. A baby whose father was a priest and whose mother was a daughter of a priest. What great expectations Z&E must have dreamed about for their baby.

But that question, **What will this child become?** is one I think we ask of all babies as we hold them in our arms. A baby’s future is so full of potential. As we look at a newborn baby, we are filled with awe and wonder. Each baby is a child of God. God sees potential in each of us. We are all created for a purpose. To live out our lives as people of faith, as disciples of Christ, in the way of love and peace, in a way that transforms our relationships and the world. **We are all called to be prophetic witnesses to the coming Messiah.**

In many hospitals, when a baby is born, the chimes ring out over the loud speakers broadcast to the whole hospital. In the midst of much sadness and darkness elsewhere in the hospital those chimes mark the joy of a new life and the hope for future and shine some light.



Two weeks ago, we baptized Grace here and prayed over her. We promised to pray for her and surround her with a community of love and forgiveness, so that she can grow in her trust of God, and be found faithful in her service to others and be a true disciple who walks in the way that leads to life. When we look at a young child, we see such promise and **anticipate** life in all its fullness.



What I have found with my own children and the children of this church, is that I also love watching them in their twenties. As they go off to college or work, I love to hear about their dreams for their future and see them passionately work towards that fulfillment. It was great to have Cassidy back last week, and Marie will be here tomorrow evening. Listen to them talk! Sometimes our young adults have success, and sometimes failure and a modified dream. We continue to hold Owen, AJ and Lauren in our hearts as they find their path. But you do not need economic success or educational attainment or worldly success to be witnesses for God. And when we talk to them, we can offer them the encouragement that wells up inside of us.



I wonder what it was like for Zechariah to be unable to speak for 9 plus months. What must it have felt like? He has had plenty of time and solitude to contemplate. He has had gestational time. What has God birthed in him? Has his heart mended? Is his faith deeply restored? What renewal has he experienced?



In the second half of our scripture for this morning, we are going to hear about Zechariah's response. But before we do, we have been passing the peace in silence for the past few weeks in solidarity with Zechariah. In a moment, we are going to pass the peace, and today you can talk! But before we do, let me ask you a few questions! What has it been like for you to not be able to speak? What has God stirred in you? What have you realized? *<Passing the Peace>*

Now Zechariah has his voice back and is so filled with happiness and the Holy Spirit that he glimpses John's life through God's eternal eyes. Let's listen to what happens next.

< Luke 1:67, 68-79, 80 >

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

*68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.*

*69 He has raised up a mighty savior^[a] for us
in the house of his servant David,*

70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,

73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon^[h] us,

79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.



What a beautiful prophetic vision Zechariah has for his baby son. What Great Expectations. This is the second song in Luke 1. The first song was Mary’s song that we know as the **Magnificat**, as Mary celebrated God’s holiness, strength and mercy and tells about God’s power coming to turn the world upside-down. Now we have Zechariah’s song that we know as the **Benedictus** which was its first word in the Latin translation. We’ll have the angel’s song tomorrow and Simeon’s next Sunday from Luke 2.

In response to people wondering, “**What then will this child become?**” the old priest broke out in this ecstatic song of prophecy and blessing and expectation. The lyrics honor John’s birth praising what is done and predicting what is to come. John is to be a prophetic witness to the coming Messiah. The song contains quotations from Israel’s

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prophets that are interwoven with Zechariah’s own words of commissioning and blessing for his infant son. John will be the bridge between the law and its fulfillment, the prophet who will proclaim the Messiah’s presence, the voice who will call the whole creation to repentance in response to the promise of salvation.

What *Great Expectations* Zechariah had for his son! Zechariah’s song reinforces God’s historic salvation story, revealing salvation to ordinary, faithful, oftentimes poor, people and calling them to prophesy. It foreshadows the call of the shepherds to proclaim and

witness to the Messiah's birth. (which we will hear tomorrow). No longer will the future be hopeless and barren for God's people.¹

And God is still on the move in our time calling us out of barren futures and into salvation. The call is to follow as God **guides our feet into the way of peace**, making us vessels of *light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.*" The signs of God's salvation come again and again, like chimes that ring out the proclamation of new life amid the death in hospital corridors. Ordinary people still hear surprising songs of God's transforming work of salvation. They still sing, shout, and whisper prophetically of God's guidance into ways of peace.²



Zechariah had nine months to be still and listen to what God put on his heart. My heart has been torn this season by pictures of migrants seeking asylum, and young children still detained in camps, and even closer to us by those whose lives were devastated by the wildfires. And yet my heart has been lifted by the protests at the border and the work and dreams of our conference. *<explain more>*



Have we been still enough this Advent to listen to the *Great Expectations* that God has for this church family? How are we being called to prepare the way, to offer forgiveness and walk the way of peace?



God rejoices for us, as much as for Zechariah, Elizabeth and John, God has called you to your life. Let it speak. Let nothing get in the way of being the person that you are called to be.

Though we may live in between times, when we do not yet fully walk in the way of **peace**, we can still journey together with great expectations and wait with **anticipation**.

Thanks be to God,
Amen.

Let us pray ... <Luke 1:67-75 The Voice>

*May the Lord God of Israel be blessed indeed!
For God's intervention has begun,
and He has moved to rescue us, the people of God.
And the Lord has raised up a powerful sign of liberation for us
from among the descendants of God's servant, King David.
As was prophesied through the mouths of His holy prophets in ancient times:
God will liberate us from our enemies
and from the hand of our oppressors!*

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*, (Kindle Locations 1383-1386).

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*, (Kindle Locations 1393-1397).

*God will show mercy promised to our ancestors,
upholding the abiding covenant He made with them,
Remembering the original vow He swore to Abraham,
from whom we are all descended.
God will rescue us from the grasp of our enemies
so that we may serve Him without fear all our days
In holiness and justice, in the presence of the Lord.*

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Clayton, Timothy. *Exploring Advent with Luke: Four Questions for Spiritual Growth*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2012.

Jarvis, Cynthia A. and E. Elizabeth Johnson. *Feasting on the Gospels--Luke, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.