

Ordinary People, Extraordinary God
Luke 1:5-25, 57-80
First Presbyterian Church
November 28, 2021

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. ⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” ²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended; he went to his home. ²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

⁵⁷Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” ⁶¹They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” ⁶²Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. ⁶⁷Then 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. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” ⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

The Gospel of Luke, like the other three, is about Jesus. What’s interesting is that in Luke the name “Jesus” doesn’t appear for the first 30 verses... and Jesus himself is not born until well into the story. Yes, Luke will eventually tell us about Mary’s extraordinary pregnancy and Jesus’ extraordinary birth, but not yet... not until we’re fully prepared in our hearts and minds for this story. So, he begins his Gospel with Zechariah and Elizabeth, a pious and devout Jewish couple... who, in the course of BEING pious and devout, encountered an extraordinary God. This morning’s reading is admittedly a long one... and I encourage you to read it in its entirety at home... or find it on your Bible app or in your pew Bible and follow along this morning. But rather than read it and then tell it, I will simply tell it.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were born into a priestly family. Descended from Israel’s very first high priest, Aaron, they belonged to a significant group of Jews who were extremely earnest about their religion... and were continually looking for a savior to deliver Israel. However, as it had been with Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah and the unnamed mother of Samson before her, Elizabeth had not been blessed with children... and she and Zechariah were now very old. As I said, Zechariah was a priest in Aaron’s line. Aaron’s family was divided into 24 divisions named for his 24 sons - and these divisions took turns serving at the altar of the temple in Jerusalem.

Most of the year, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in the hill country where he would teach and perform his priestly duties in the local synagogue. But twice a year... when it was his division’s turn to serve... they would travel to Jerusalem and live in “temple housing.” Which is precisely where Luke’s story begins – in the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah’s division was on duty... and he was chosen by lot to burn incense on the altar inside the Holy Place – a privilege that was normally granted only once in a lifetime. You may know that the Jews believed that a human could not see God... could not come face to face with God... and live to tell of it. So, whenever a priest entered the Holy Place, a rope was tied around his ankle as a precaution... just in case. With that in mind, Luke tells us that when Zechariah entered the Holy Place, he immediately discovered he was not alone. For before him, just to the right of the altar, stood an angel waiting for him to arrive. Zechariah was understandably startled and scared and in awe – standing before such holiness tends to do that to you... and aware of his situation the angel quickly reassured him that he had nothing to fear... that he was God’s messenger, sent to tell Zechariah that their prayers had been heard. Elizabeth would conceive and bear a very special son who would be named John. Their child would abstain from strong drink... and instead, would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his very conception. And finally, he would go before the coming messiah... and in the spirit of the great prophet Elijah, he would turn many of the children of Israel back to God and make ready for the Lord a “prepared people.” Imagining I am Zechariah? I am completely overwhelmed! Outside the Holy Place, a crowd waited anxiously for the priest’s reappearance and blessing.

Since, the incense burning typically took just a few minutes, they started wondering what might be happening. Meanwhile INSIDE the Holy Place, Zechariah and the angel continued their back and forth.

Understandably, Zechariah was skeptical of the angel's news – he wanted a sign... some proof...SOMETHING that would help him believe. And in the category of “be careful what you ask for,” that's just what he got... proof! Only it came in the form of punishment for his disbelief. You can almost hear the angel say, “Zechariah, do you have any idea who I am? I am Gabriel... one of the seven archangels who stand in the presence of God. I have been sent FROM GOD to speak to you and bring you this good news... (which, by the way, WILL BE FULLFILLED in its time). But because you did not believe my words, you will be mute... speech-less... until this occurs.

When after all this Zechariah finally appeared, it must've seemed to the anxious crowd like game of charades with the old priest making signs and gestures to tell them what had happened. I mean, you've all played charades... he couldn't speak... so how would you describe a talking angel with just your hands and arms and face? Try it... it's not easy.

Which bring us to the end of this part of the story – a very quiet Zechariah (and you have to wonder if Elizabeth sort of enjoyed that) a very quiet Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, headed back home to the hill country... where Elizabeth will joyfully celebrate what she has wanted more than anything else in her life – the birth of her own child.

Friends, the message this morning is as profound as it is simple. Though Luke will eventually get to the extraordinary story of Jesus' extraordinary birth, first, he wants to remind us of something important... two things, actually. First, this story teaches us that though God was doing a very new thing in the birth of Jesus, God did this new thing in what we might say was a “traditional” way. Think about it - the announcement was given in the temple... at the hour of the burning incense... to a priest in the line of the first high priest, Aaron. You can't get much more traditional than that! Zechariah and Elizabeth were devout people... people who were earnest about their religion and who were faithfully looking for a savior to deliver Israel... a lot like many of you, I would say. So, what does that say to us... this morning... about what God might yet do through you and through the people of this church.

Which brings us to the second thing this story teaches us – and that is that even the most faithful of us can sometimes grow dull in our expectations. Here's the story of a priest who was praying fervently but was not prepared for his prayers to be answered... a priest who was leading worship in the sanctuary itself, and never expected to encounter God. Truth is... Zechariah and Elizabeth weren't expecting any of this – the once in a lifetime chance to burn incense in the Holy Place... the appearance of the angel Gabriel... the promise of a child in their dotage – they weren't expecting any of that! And hearing their story this morning, we are challenged to once again renew our trust in God... to watch expectantly for God to show up at any time... and to be prepared for God's response whenever it may come. You and I go through the motions of prayer and worship, but do we really expect to encounter the living God? We try to live as Jesus would have us live... we try to do what we can to love our neighbor... but do we really expect that God will actually do something through us? Friends, sometimes even the very faithful – even folks like Zechariah - need to recover the vitality of worship and prayer and doing the ordinary things we do every day to serve our God. Because the time God gives each of us is important... Each day is the day the Lord has made... each day is for us to rejoice and be glad in... each day gives us one more chance to love and serve the Lord. And when that message breaks through our cynicism ... when it really breaks through our dulled expectations, then we, too, can join (the now mother, Elizabeth) in the joyful exclamation, “This is what the Lord has done for me.”