

Sermon for Zion, September 22, 2019

Hymns: 814 – Morning Has Broken; 292 – Father, I Adore You;

752 – Blest Be the God of Israel; 123 – My soul gives glory to my God

Scriptures: Luke 1:13-17

Sermon Title: It All Starts with a Baby – The Investigator’s Gospel part 2

Luke 1:13-17 (NIV)

*The angel said to Zechariah: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

It all starts with a baby. With two babies, actually; with two babies, and an old man, and a post-menopausal wife, and a young woman, and an angel, and a song. Two songs. And a promise. But don’t forget the baby.

It isn’t how you might expect it all to start. I wish I could be reading it for the first time – to hear this story with no background, no preconceptions – fresh – just to see what I would make of it. Just to see how I would react. It’s particularly startling after the very formal introduction, where Luke sets out his sources, his method, his audience, and his goal, namely, “to write an orderly account.”

And that orderly account then proceeds to unfold in the most disorderly and unexpected way. First of all, it starts not with the birth of Jesus, but of his cousin, John, who would come to be known as “The Baptist.” John had a far greater importance in New Testament times than he does in ours, and Luke begins his Gospel with John’s nativity story – which begins, of course, with John’s parents.

They’re introduced to us quite formally, Luke carefully establishing the when, the where, the who: *“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.”* And then the bad news: *“But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.”*

And it is to this unlikely couple that the even more unlikely Angel Gabriel pays a visit. Why unlikely? We're used to angels bringing news – again, we know the story – but for the elderly Zechariah, this is unprecedented. As it was for the whole world – the Old Testament is largely silent about angels. And if you're introducing a baby into the story, an infertile elderly couple is an unlikely place to start. Unless, that is, you are familiar with the Old Testament, in which case, Abraham and Sarah would leap to mind. You might recall that they were both well past childbearing years when God made a promise to them – that their child would be the forerunner of a new people of faith. It was from Sarah's womb that Isaac would be born – Isaac, the forerunner of Jacob, father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Now, from another elderly womb, another forerunner would come, preparing the way for a new people of faith.

Zechariah is serving in the Temple when Gabriel speaks: *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John... And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

When Abraham, 2000 years before, received the promise of a child in his old age, the Bible tells us (Genesis 17:17), *“Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’”* Fair enough. Sarah, we are told, also let out a snort of laughter in disbelief at the news. You'd laugh, too, most of you, if someone – even an angel – told you that you were about to be a new parent. Again. In celebration of their reaction, God directs that the child would be named Isaac, which means Laughter, showing that God has a sense of humour too.

But the Angel Gabriel doesn't. When Zechariah expresses incredulity - *“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years”* – Gabriel strikes him mute until after the baby is born. Despite which, upon returning home Zechariah makes the situation sufficiently clear to the patient Elizabeth that lo, Elizabeth was soon with child. That's baby number one.

And if you thought that's an unlikely way to have a baby, wait till you hear what's next. Again, familiarity has rendered us unable to react to this story the way we should; try to imagine yourself hearing it for the first time. To help you listen to this perhaps differently that you had in the past, firstly, I'm going to use the translation called the Contemporary English Version, which will sound a bit different; and secondly, keep in mind that according to strong church tradition, Luke got this story from none other than Mary herself, one of the eyewitnesses whose testimony he incorporates into his Gospel. So Mary says, and Luke writes:

*God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. The angel greeted Mary and said, “You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you.”*

*Mary was confused by the angel’s words and wondered what they meant. Then the angel told Mary, “Don’t be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end.”*

*Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen? I am not married!”*

*The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God’s power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible for God!”*

*Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant! Let it happen as you have said.” And the angel left her.*

So; the forerunner John is on the way, growing leaps and bounds in the womb of his elderly mother; and now the Saviour is announced, to be conceived by the Holy Spirit to an engaged but as-yet-unmarried young virgin. They are relatives, Mary and Elizabeth, but otherwise opposite in every way. Except for their unlikeliness.

As unlikely as Zechariah and Elizabeth were, at least they were married; at least Zechariah was a priest, and engaged in the work of the Temple; at least they lived in Ein Karem, a suburb of Jerusalem, centre of the Judean religious world. But Mary? Unmarried. Engaged – the engagement in those days was for a year, and for the express purpose of making sure there was not already a bun in the bridal oven – but unmarried nonetheless. And a virgin, as both the text and she make quite clear.

And this unmarried virgin, who strong tradition claims was a Jerusalem girl, is living in Nazareth with the family of her betrothed for the engagement period, while they keep an eye on her, and teach her the family recipes and customs. Nazareth, unlike Jerusalem, was not the centre of the Judean religious world. It was in Galilee, the hill country of the north, known as an area constantly fomenting rebellion, a bit of a Wild West reputation, brought to heel only recently by nasty King Herod. And Nazareth had only been settled a generation before, by ex-pat Jews returning from exile afar, who responded to incentives to resettle the Galilee, which had become increasingly Gentile over the previous few centuries.

Archaeologists busily digging away in Nazareth these days uncover settlements to as far back as the days of Jesus, but not before. A newly settled tribal hill-top community of only 40 or so families, you couldn't come from a less-likely place than Nazareth, if you were going to make something of yourself in the world. Jesus, when an adult, would be mocked for his Nazarene roots: "*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*" asked Nathanael, when invited to meet Jesus (John 1:46). And so of course, this is the place God chooses. The most unlikely place, the most unlikely of circumstances, the most unlikely of mothers.

Finally, I promised you songs. Two songs. Two unlikely songs, and an unlikely celebration. The celebration occurs when the newly pregnant Mary, in an act of discretion and self-preservation, leaves watchful, nosy Nazareth (remember, she was there so that Joseph's family could keep an eye on her) and travels to the suburban Jerusalem home of cousin Elizabeth, now six months along. Perhaps she was able to use Elizabeth's pregnancy as an excuse to leave – "She's old, you know, and needs help" – and is therefore able to keep her own growing belly under wraps.

Upon arrival, no excuses or explanations were required. The Holy Spirit had already prepared Elizabeth's heart. No stranger herself to miraculous pregnancies, she greets Mary not with suspicion, but with celebration. Listen (Luke 1:41-45):

*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice 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 my 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 the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"*

Mary, no stranger to the Holy Spirit herself, responds in a song so magnificent, we call it the Magnificat. It starts much the way you might expect; listen (Luke 1:46-55):

*"My soul magnifies (hence the name "Magnificat") the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."*

But then the song takes an unexpected turn. Put yourself in Luke's place, as he visits Mary, who is now advanced in years. She's singing the song for him, her eyes, clouded with the years, focussing on the distant memory:

*“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”*

There’s Luke, quill in hand, wondering where on earth that came from. But then he recalls the words of Jesus that he had read in Matthew and Mark’s Gospels; *“lifting up the humble, filling the hungry with good things”*, sounds an awful lot like what Jesus said, taught, and did. Had Mary sung that song to Jesus, wooing him to sleep in her arms, placing those words in his heart?

Mary turns her gaze to the puzzled Luke. “It’s a song my ancestor Hannah sang, a thousand years ago, when she was blessed with a child in her womb.” And Mary sings the Hannah song for Luke (you can find it in your Bibles, in 1 Samuel 2:1-10). See if any of it sounds familiar:

*“My heart rejoices in the Lord! The Lord has made me strong. No one is holy like the Lord! The bow of the mighty is now broken, and those who stumbled are now strong. The Lord makes some poor and others rich; he brings some down and lifts others up. He lifts the poor from the dust and the needy from the garbage dump. For all the earth is the Lord’s, and he has set the world in order. He will protect his faithful ones, and exalt the power of his anointed.”*

Mary is reaching back through the centuries, all the way to another woman of faith, and her celebration song – a song in which the promises of the Lord are declared, and are now, through the child in Mary’s womb, fulfilled; *“He will protect his faithful ones, and exalt the power of his anointed.”* And the Hebrew word for Anointed? “Messiah.” Or, in the Greek and Latin, “Christ.” It’s all right there. Right there in Mary’s magnificent song.

Mary, we are told, stays with her cousin, until Elizabeth and Zechariah’s baby is born. And on the eighth day, when it is time for the baby to be named, Zechariah’s voice is restored, and it is his turn to sing. He, like Mary and Elizabeth before him, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and not only is his tongue loosed, but his eyes are open to what God is doing through these unusual and unexpected pregnancies (Luke 1:67-79):

*“Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant - the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor*

*Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.”*

He’s tying it all together, is Zechariah, is Luke through Zechariah’s song – the birth of Jesus, the arrival of the Messiah, is part of the plan and promise of God, stretching all the way back to Abraham. Salvation has come.

But then Zechariah turns his attention from the Messiah, to his own son John, who will pave the way:

*“And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”*

Like Mary, Zechariah is looking both to the past and to the future. To the past, and the prophet Elijah, in whose footsteps John will tread, proclaiming the Day of the Lord; to the future, where John will stand knee-deep in the Jordan, inviting people to “Repent,” and to be washed in the waters of the forgiveness of sin; and then this breathtakingly beautiful promise:

*“Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”*

Old Zechariah knew his Bible, and knew the prophet Isaiah by heart; it is doubtless what he recalled, as he sang Isaiah’s 700 year old words, finally about to come to fruition (Isaiah 9:2): *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”* So sang Isaiah; and it might interest you to know, that just a couple of verses later, Isaiah sings words perhaps more familiar to you (Isaiah 9:6-7):

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* And he can see it, can Zechariah. He can see the promise coming true.

That’s how Luke begins his Gospel. That’s how he starts his “orderly account.” It all starts with a baby. With two babies, actually; with two babies, and an old man and his wife, and a young woman, and an angel, and a song. Two songs. And a promise. A promise of salvation, for you, for me, for all the world. But don’t forget the baby. Because in that baby, the promise comes true. Thanks be to God. Amen.