

## THE UNEXPECTED

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

December 2, 2018

Our Advent journey begins this year with a man and a woman who are easy to overlook as we move towards Bethlehem and the birth of a Savior. But according to Luke, the story of Jesus begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of the one who would announce the coming of God's Messiah. They are introduced to us as a childless older couple, both descendants of Aaron, and so both raised in priestly families and taught since birth to serve the temple in Jerusalem. We are told that they were both righteous. We are told that they lived "blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord," which means that they both took very seriously the living and practicing of their faith.

Zechariah was a member of one of 24 divisions of priests or one of approximately 18,000 priests. When it was time for Zechariah's group of priest to report for duty in Jerusalem, they would have cast lots to see who would actually do what. Zechariah was the big winner, he was chosen to enter the inner sanctuary of the temple to burn incense on the holy altar, while the other priests and the assembled people prayed outside. The burning incense was an act of worship in which the produced smoke would carry to God the people's prayers seeking forgiveness of their sin. After the burning of the incense and the offering of the prayers, Zechariah alone would have then emerge from the inner sanctuary to bless the people, representing God to them as he had represented them to God. It was a great honor and a great responsibility. It was a job no priest could do twice in his lifetime and many never got to do it all.

As Zechariah entered the inner sanctuary of the Temple, he set about doing his duty. It was in the midst of that priestly duty that something truly unexpected and extraordinary happened – an angel suddenly appeared. We are told that it was the angel Gabriel. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." Which prayer was that? After all, he was in the midst of offering all kinds of prayers for the people of Israel. But Gabriel was not referring to a prayer for the people, but a personal prayer for a child. That for which he and his wife had been praying for years was going to happen.

Perhaps it sounded too good to be true, because questions started to pop into Zechariah's head, questions filled with doubt. Zechariah's immediate focus is on the obstacle of age rather than the sovereignty of God. We do the same thing. We look at what we consider to be the "realities," and we draw our own conclusions as to what God is or is not capable of doing, and what is or is not God's will. And yet, God is not limited by our expectations and our plans. Zechariah's failure is easily our failure – a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, perhaps even a habit of hopelessness.

The angel gave Zechariah amazingly good news about a time of restoration and hope not just for him and Elizabeth, but for the entire nation. You see, even though Zechariah was a good and righteous man of faith, he had apparently stopped expecting the unexpected – he had stopped expecting God's intervention in his life. Because he was not prepared to believe the good news, and he was not prepared to be obedient and embrace that news, he is silenced by the angel. How embarrassing it must have been for Zechariah to emerge from the sanctuary on that once-in-a-lifetime day and not be able to complete his job. He was unable pronounce the blessing on the people. All those people who had waited in anticipation for a blessing went home without one, while Zechariah played an embarrassing game of charades on the steps of the Temple.

Zechariah's muteness is apparently punishment for his doubt, and yet, that silence became into a blessing as Zechariah's own faith and trust in God was deepened. During those nine months of enforced silence and a miraculous pregnancy, both Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced personally God's sovereign power. As they learned the value of listening to and trusting in God they began to embrace the unexpected nature of God. They learned and accepted that God does not always answer prayer when or how we expect and desire. They learned that instead of being doubtful when God shows up differently and answers come differently than expected, it's best to be receptive.

By the time their son was born and as it came to the eighth day of his life, Zechariah and Elizabeth were unquestionably obedient to the message given by Gabriel nine months earlier when he said, "You will name him John (vs. 13). On that eighth day, Zechariah went against the cultural norm of naming the first male child after his father. Instead, the name Zechariah gave was "John," meaning "Gift of God" or "God is gracious." It was at that moment of obedience that Zechariah's mouth was opened and his speech restored. With a full voice, he broke into a song of praise to God followed by a beautiful blessing of his newborn son.

Zechariah learned that when God shows up, we need to expect the unexpected, and we might as well believe in the unimaginable. By the time Zechariah spoke, a faith based mostly on duty had been replaced by a deep and passionate faith. Disbelief had been replaced with belief – fear had been replaced with boldness – routine had been replaced with the joy and awe of God's power. It was then that Zechariah was able to bear witness to the One who was doing a new thing not only in his life but also in the world.

As we enter into this time of Advent are you expecting an encounter with God? Are you expecting the unexpected? This time of the year can be such a noisy and stressful time. Many of us, most of us, become almost consumed by the hectic pace of the season. We become driven by our own schedules; we become caught up in the routines and traditions that have been more or less established for years. If honest, most of us do not expect things to be much different this year than they were last year or the year before that. We do not expect God to come to us in unexpected, new and dramatic ways. We do not expect the birth of a Savior to affect us any differently than it has in the past. And mostly, we like it that way or at least we are comfortable with it that way. Actually, it's sad that we simply accept such low expectations when it comes to God's power and mystery. To be content with the way things are and have "always" been often becomes a failure to embrace God's new revelation for our life, for our church, for our world.

But might it be possible for us to receive God's unexpected presence this year? Might it be possible to learn the lessons of listening, believing and being obedient – no matter what our age? Might we be open to God's ways or will we insist that God work in our way and according to our timetable? Might we even pray a bit differently, with a renewed sense of anticipation that comes from fully believing that God answers prayer, even if differently than we expect?

God does not necessarily promise the outcomes we want in life. But what this passage and Gabriel's announcement show us is that God is often at work in unexpected ways. If we are able to expect the unexpected this year, then perhaps our time of Advent preparation will be much more than simply routine. Perhaps this will be a time when you and I encounter the powerful and loving presence of God – a time when our limited expectations are challenged and our trust in God is strengthened! Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, let us become partners in the loving, saving and re-creating work of God in the world.