

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 28, 2021, The First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 1:5-25

Spending Advent with Luke's Gospel: Advent 1--The Angel Comes to Zechariah

There is a television ad campaign that is currently making me insane. I have a feeling I'm not the only one who talks back to my TV at times. This is an ad that makes the pastor in me go crazy.

The ad begins with a woman alone in her SUV driving beside a beautiful body of water. She is alone with the road, and then Matthew McConaughey's voiceover begins:

When you're driving a Lincoln, stress seems to evaporate into thin air. Which leaves us to wonder where does it go? Does it get tangled up in knots, or disappear forever into some kind of bottomless pit, or maybe it just floats off into the clouds?...Perhaps you'll come up with your own theory of where stress goes. Behind the wheel of a Lincoln is a mighty fine place to start."

And then the tagline that makes me insane: Lincoln, the power of *sanctuary*.

A luxury SUV and "sanctuary" are two concepts that, in the very best sense of the word "sanctuary," should never be put together. Never! The gift of Sanctuary is so much more than stress-relief, especially expensive stress relief. The gift of Sanctuary, safety and security with our God, is sooooo much more than an SUV.

This morning we have come into this sanctuary, into God's house, to begin a journey together. It is a journey that has been made by followers of Jesus for generations. This morning we begin the four-week journey to Christmas morning and welcoming the baby born in the manger, the Savior of the world.

This Sunday we enter a season of preparing. A season, as crazy as it sounds, of slowing down, a season of turning our eyes toward Bethlehem, and we wait. There is no instant gratification in Advent, there is no one step and you're done, and no SUV can protect you or rush you through this season. We are being invited into a season of waiting, preparing, praying, and hoping. We are being invited to draw near to the sanctuary of our God again because our God has dawn near to us in Jesus.

The word Advent means "coming;" this is the season we wait for the coming of Christ; we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus again. This year we will be guided through Advent by the people we will meet in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. This morning we begin with Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who knew a lot about waiting, preparing, praying, and hoping.

They were a couple, like so many other couples before them--couples whose names echoed down through the ages of Israel's stories in the Bible, because they longed for child:

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Elkanah and Hannah. Elizabeth and Zechariah had longed to have a child for all the years of their marriage. And now they were too old for children.

Unlike their parents in the faith, no child had been born to them.

There was no son to carry on their family name,
there was no son or daughter who would one day marry and give them grandchildren,
and there were no children to care for them in their old age.

And even in all their years of faithfulness to God they must have wondered, just as their neighbors wondered, if Elizabeth's barrenness was a judgment from

God.

While the dream of children was now an impossibility, that longing to hold their own child in their arms never left either Zechariah or Elizabeth, as it never leaves any person who has dealt with the heartbreak of infertility. There was a hollowness within their spirits that nothing had ever filled.

Yet Elizabeth and Zechariah were faithful followers of their God.

Luke makes sure we know they lived according to God's laws and teachings. They were both from priestly families and they lived in the rhythms of Temple life and worship; faith shaped their days.

Zechariah served as a priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. Every morning and evening, according to God's commands from the time of Moses, two types of offerings were made at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The priests from all over Israel were divided into 24 groups, each named for one of Aaron's 24 sons.

Each group served at the Temple twice a year, for a week at a time.

Each week the names of the priests who had not yet had a turn to go into the Temple sanctuary to make the Incense Offering were gathered. Then lots were drawn for whose turn it was. Basically a name was drawn out of a hat. Because there were so many priests, if a man was truly lucky his name was drawn once in his lifetime.

So, the day came when Zechariah received this privilege. He was selected to enter the Temple to offer the incense offering. As a priest this was the most important day of his life. He left the crowds behind as they were praying in the courtyard, and he entered the sanctuary itself, alone. Once inside the sanctuary, in the room outside the Holy of Holies he was meant to collect the ashes from the previous day's incense burning, and light the new incense. He wasn't supposed to linger there, but to immediately come out to the people and give them a priestly blessing.

But on this day Zechariah broke with tradition and expectation and did not immediately come back out of the Temple.

It was a day in which God also broke with tradition, by sending a messenger, the Angel Gabriel to meet Zechariah there.

The story tells us exactly how Zechariah felt as he entered one the holiest places in Jerusalem, and found an angel standing by the altar. He was terrified! The Angel Gabriel spoke words that nearly every angel visitor in the Bible has spoken when coming to humans: "Do not be afraid!" It is very clear that meeting one of God's messengers can be a terrifying experience. (But in a good way!)

"Do not be afraid!" Gabriel said. "God has heard your years of prayers and Elizabeth will give birth to a son and you will name him John."

For us, this season of waiting during Advent, can bring surprises that we won't see coming. Zechariah tells us that sometimes they are really big surprises. Sometimes they are so big we may lose all sense of manners and training, and even question God and God's messengers.

One of the books I read this week makes it clear that when God has a plan for us, the plan will take place. He points out that when Zechariah questions the angel about his wife giving birth saying: "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel Gabriel's immediate response is: "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."

"I am old," says Zechariah and "I am Gabriel," answers the angel. Gabriel basically says

“thanks for sharing, but I am Gabriel and Zechariah, you and Elizabeth may be old, but I am God’s messenger, and this is God’s plan for you. (IBC, p. 47.1.9)

Advent is a season of the unexpected. And with Zechariah as our guide today we see that God spoke to him in the middle of living out his life of faith. He and Elizabeth were faithful: they worshiped God with the community, they prayed for help and for a child, and they followed the rules of their faith and the commandments of God. In the midst of faithful living God was able to use them in a big way. God chose them to be the parents of John the Baptist, who was to be the messenger of the Messiah.

But Zechariah’s questioning led to Gabriel silencing him. His last words were “I am old,” until John was born and then Zechariah’s very first words were a song of praise that we will spend time with in two weeks.

Just as Israel waited and prayed for generations for God’s promised Messiah, and Zechariah and Elizabeth waited for 9 months for the birth of their promised son, we too are called to wait during this season of Advent. In the next four weeks we are called to wait and enter into a time of preparing to hear the story of a birth that changed the world forever.

This Advent, let us enter into the temples of our hearts, expecting to praise God there, and bring the offerings of our time, our silence and our devotion. I am convinced that if we spend time in that preparation, there will be messages for us to help us get ready for this season of new birth. There will be guidance to help us make room in our hearts, in new ways, for the birth of our Savior.

And let’s avoid the mistake of faithful, and understandably shocked Zechariah who said: “I am old.” May this not be a season of making excuses: I’m too old, I’m too young, I’m too tired, I’m too busy, I’m too.... well, you know what your excuse is...so I’ll let you fill in the blank and then I encourage you to leave that excuse here in the Sanctuary this morning.

Because the true “power of sanctuary” is that it holds what needs to be changed in us, it gives us strength for the journey ahead, and it reminds us that our surprising God is active and moving in each of our lives.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we are entering a season of new birth, a season of heavenly surprises, a season of preparation, of hope, of angels, and a season of messages from our God.

Let us listen well, because the gift of the “power of sanctuary” is that there is a place for us in the heart of our God. It is that love that will guide us forward into these four weeks of Advent, as we join Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the generations of people of faith before us, in waiting, preparing, praying, and hoping. That is the true power of sanctuary.

For background information, see: *The New Interpreter’s Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. I.; Luke, John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 44-49