

The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 5, 2021  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Baruch 5:1-9  
Canticle 16: The Song of Zechariah (Benedictus)  
Philippians 1:3-11  
Luke 3:1-6

In the first couple of verses of the gospel that bears his name, Luke tells us what he's trying to do. He wants "to set down an orderly account" of the life of Jesus. And then he jumps right in, starting with a story about a priest named Zechariah. And this is how that story starts:

***In the days of King Herod of Judea,*** there was a priest named Zechariah ...

Luke quickly tells us about Zechariah's kinfolk and about his wife, Elizabeth, and her kinfolk. Luke tells us that they were good people. But they never had children, unfortunately, which was a sadness for them. And it meant they were the sort of people who'd likely be forgotten. Ah, but then Luke gives us a twist in the story. An angel named Gabriel brings good news to Zechariah, telling him that he and Elizabeth, in their old age, would have a son, and their son would be named John. The birth of John is what gives rise to a song, a canticle we call it; a song still used in worship: our psalm this morning, "The Song of Zechariah," the *Benedictus*.

That's the backstory to our gospel reading today. And it all began like this:

***In the days of King Herod of Judea,*** there was a priest named Zechariah ...

Thirty-three years later (give or take), Zechariah's son, John, was grown up. And "King Herod of Judea" was long dead. His kingdom had fractured upon his death, with bits of it going to his sons (including one named after "King Herod of Judea," or in the historical record, Herod the Great). Luke wants to tell us about the grown-up John. And this is how *this* story starts:

***In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,*** the word of God came to John son of Zechariah ...

And by now, perhaps, you'll sense a pattern, because in between these two stories about the birth of John (the infant), in chapter 1, and the preaching of John (the baptizer), in chapter 3, Luke tells us a story about the birth of Jesus, in chapter 2. And this is how he starts that story:

***In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*** All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem ...

Maybe I'll say something about all of this again come Christmas Eve (when we'll hear those words again), but today, let's stay with these stories about John.

There is a surprising point of emphasis that Luke is making hard for us to miss. He keeps reminding us of who's "large and in charge," at least in the way most of the world reckons things. And then he consistently re-directs our attention to where, in truth, the important stuff is really happening.

"In the days of King Herod of Judea ..." That's how Luke began. But he tells us about an angel who overlooked a king and came instead to bless a washed-up priest and his barren wife.

In this morning's gospel, Luke rattles off the names of an emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs, and two high priests. That's how Luke began. But he tells us that God overlooked all of them in favor of rabble-raising figure on the fringes of society.

Here's a paraphrase that makes the point:

***Despite Tiberius being Emperor of Rome, and Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias being provincial rulers, and despite Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, God chose to speak to a nobody named John living in the desert.***<sup>i</sup>

It's a twist nobody could have seen coming.

Nobody, that is, except Zechariah. Zechariah anticipated this twist from the moment of John's birth. He sang about it the day John was born:

*You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, \*  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way ...*

Maybe he saw the possibilities because he was holy and understood that God is always more concerned for those on the margins than for those with power and privilege. Or maybe he saw the possibilities because he was a new parent and his eyes were full of tears of joy. And rather than cloud his sight, the tears sharpened the wonder of his vision.<sup>ii</sup> Either way, Zechariah saw something then that we'd all do well to see now.

A reflection from an old copy of *The Anglican Digest* reminds us never to limit how and where God works:

We live in a world in which "bigger and better" define our expectations for much of life. We have become so enamored by super-size, super-stars, and high-definition that we tend to overlook small things and their potential. But throughout the Scriptures, we find God usually works with small beginnings and impossible situations. Most of the Biblical heroes are frail and imperfect:

- Abraham, the coward who cannot believe the promise;
- Jacob, the cheat who struggles with everybody;
- Joseph, the immature and arrogant teen;
- Moses, the impatient murderer who cannot wait for God;
- Gideon, the cowardly Baal-worshiper;
- Samson, the womanizing drunk;
- David, the power-abusing adulterer;
- Solomon, the unwise wise man; ...
- A very young Jewish girl from a small village in a remote corner of a great empire.

If God used all of them for such great work, it is likely that God is able to use us, inadequate, unwise, and too often lacking in faith. We best not, in self-righteousness, put limits on what God can do with the smallest things, the most unlikely of people, and the most hopeless of circumstances. <sup>iii</sup>

And more to the point of our readings here this morning, if God sees more possibilities in a “nobody” in the hinterlands than in those who sit in seats of power, God likely sees more possibilities in you and in me than most of us would guess. We, too, can take on the holy work of preparing the way. And that way, of course, is the way of love. The high and mighty have no corner on that. Indeed, angels bring good news of God’s love to those who most need to hear it. Not all are seated in positions of power. But all are called to love.

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<sup>i</sup> John Petty (?) @ <https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/12/04/the-word-came-to-who-luke-31-6-advent-2c/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Idea sparked by Robb McCoy @ <https://fatpastor.me/2012/12/22/declare-that-the-dawn-is-coming/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Joyce Stickney, “Advent Hope,” in *The Anglican Digest* (Vol., No. 4, Winter A.D. 2012), p. 3.