

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2018
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Baruch 5:1-9
Song of Zechariah: *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79)
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

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 ...

That's how our gospel this morning begins.

Luke's gospel is an "orderly account," as he himself describes it in the opening verses. So it's important for him to line up the historical dates and such. And the details he provides actually allow modern-day historians to conclude this takes place around 28 to 29 AD.

And Luke has other reasons, I think, for offering his list of the "who's who" of his age. It's like describing our time and place by noting the personages assembled this past week for the funeral of George Herbert Walker Bush: five Presidents, past and present, among them ... seated in the National Cathedral.

It's pretty easy to think ourselves pretty insignificant in comparison.

And I think that may be the point to consider this morning. It may be easy to think ourselves insignificant in comparison to the world's VIPs, but that's not the gospel truth.

If we think ourselves insignificant, consider Zechariah. We know something about Zechariah because of the story Luke tells about him and his wife, Elizabeth. Their story, and the story of John the Baptist, their son, has been passed down to us across the centuries. But in their own times, they were seemingly insignificant. And they should have been long-forgotten.

Zechariah's name was drawn one day, seemingly by chance, to go into the Temple to carry out routine priestly duties. And there the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son ... and they would name him John.

But Zechariah thought it all unlikely: "How will I know this is so?" he asked. "For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." And for his impudence, the angel struck him mute until it all should come to pass.

And then, when John was born, Zechariah bursts out in song. And that's the *Benedictus*, the psalm we read/sang today.

The words pour out, ostensibly because Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit. And that's likely so. But maybe the months of angel-imposed silence also gave him time for a lot more thinking and listening than usual. Maybe the silence gave him permission to ponder the possibilities for a son – his hopes and dreams for what this child would be. Maybe it gave him time to compose a few verses to celebrate the occasion.

I like to think Zechariah's song was more than something dictated to him by the Spirit, that it was something he helped write. That's more the way any of us anticipate of a child to be born. The birth of any child is a cause for awe and wonder. What will this child be? What will he do? What will she become?

And every child of God has a calling in life. There is something that transcends labels, gender, race, status. It's our human calling to share some light in the darkness, to drive away the gloom around us, to take our part in placing and guiding our feet along the pathways of peace.

We are, none of us, insignificant. That's the good news I hear in that birth story of John.

And if we think ourselves insignificant, I remind you of how our gospel this morning begins. It begins with that long list in order to introduce us to John the Baptist. But here he is simply "John son of Zechariah." And he's the one to whom "the word of God" comes. Not the Emperor. Not to any of the rulers in his day. Not to the high priests of the day. But "the word of God [comes] to John son of [obscure, insignificant] Zechariah."

And it comes to him, significantly, "in the wilderness." Not in Rome. Not in Athens. Not in Washington, D.C. The word comes to John in the middle of nowhere.

The whole story in this holy season of Advent insists that those supposedly in charge take a backseat to God's plans. At least that's how Luke tells the tale.

When the angel Gabriel came to a worn-down Zechariah, we're told that it was "in the days of King Herod of Judea." In a couple of weeks, on Christmas Eve, we'll hear about "a decree from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered ... [this] first registration [being] taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." And again, of course, there's today's gospel – that ominous litany of political, economic, and religious powers and principalities.

But by the time anyone read Luke's gospel, none of those proud and powerful men were alive. They were already just footnotes to history and certainly to this gospel. We don't come here this morning to hear about any of them; we're here to hear about John son of Zechariah. Zechariah and Elizabeth and John are all more important than the VIPs of the day.

And on Christmas Eve, of course, we won't come to talk about Emperor Augustus, but about a child born to an unwed mother, and laid in the feeding trough of a stable in some backwater province of the Roman Empire.

Luke tells it the way he does, I think, to usurp the lie that we're insignificant in comparison.

And still we are drawn *moth-like* to the greater lights of our world. To world leaders. To celebrities. To the rich and famous.

And if we're not careful, we conclude that they're the ones we should pay attention to ... that we, in the grand scheme of things, are insignificant.

But that's a lie. It's not the gospel truth.

I came across a pithy little verse someone offered amongst all the AdventWord reflections and images shared this past week that makes the point:

Jesus bids us shine with a clear, pure light,
Like a little candle burning in the night;
In this world of darkness, we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

We're not all the same. Our lights may seem different. But we're all called to shine. And no light is insignificant when light and love is what this darkened world needs.

That's a thought that occurred to me as I reflected on the funeral this past Wednesday of our 41st President. But even then I heard at least a hint of the idea that we are, none of us, insignificant.

I didn't sit down to watch the funeral live on TV. I saw only a very few minutes of one of the eulogies offered that day. But I've heard from some of you about the pomp and grandeur of it all. And I've seen some of the images. And I've read some of the descriptions of the scene: the current President of the United States, along with four former Presidents; four eulogists; and more clergy than I could count, including our celebrity Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

In that few moments I did see on TV, I heard the very end of Jon Meacham's eulogy. Meacham had earlier recalled the story of George Bush was the sole survivor after being shot down in World War II. Meacham said that Bush spent the rest of his life asking "Why was I spared?"

And after going on to recall a life well-lived, Meacham ended the eulogy with these words:

That was the real George H.W. Bush, a loving man with a big, vibrant, all-enveloping heart. And so we ask, as we commend his soul to God, and as he did, "Why him? Why was he spared?" The workings of providence are mysterious, but this much is clear: that George Herbert Walker Bush, who survived that fiery fall into the waters of the Pacific three-quarters-of-a-century ago, made our lives and the lives of nations freer, better, warmer, and nobler.

That was his mission. That was his heartbeat. And if we listen closely enough, we can hear that heartbeat even now. For it's the heartbeat of a lion, a lion who not only led us, but who loved us. That's why him. That's why he was spared.

But if we say this of him, we ought to say the same of ourselves.

We miss the point – and we miss it to the point of heresy, I think – if we accept the lie that God plucks some out of the ocean to demand they alone should live significant lives. We miss the point entirely if we imagine God would drown others as if their lives didn't matter.

By all means, take note of any and all who lead exemplary lives: Zechariah and Elizabeth, for starters; John their son; and, yes, George Herbert Walker Bush, who once famously encouraged us to create a “kinder, gentler nation.”

But let us not accept the lie that we are, accordingly, insignificant. We are all here to make “our live and the lives of [others] freer, better, warmer, and nobler. That's the heartbeat not just of a proverbial lion among us; that's the heartbeat of humanity. Some may be set to lead. All are called to love.

And we are all here to prepare the way for the one who is yet to come among us and set things right in this world.