

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Luke 1:1-25 and 57-80

“Congratulations! You’re Going To Be a Father!”

In case you haven’t noticed, at Christmas, Jesus is big news. Time, Newsweek and Life magazines often have Jesus’ picture on their covers as the holiday draws near. This year, Newsweek did not disappoint with its nativity scene cover complete with speech bubbles. “Who was Jesus?” flashed one. “Did he have a wife? How many wise men were there? Why Bethlehem?” And, “In a manger or a cave?”

The article, written by Bart Ehrman, who some of you are familiar with because the ADG read one of his books a couple years ago, is titled “The Myths of Jesus”. Ehrman writes, “but what do we really know about the historical truth of the early life of Jesus? Even the gospels disagree.”

Now, for anyone who knows the Gospel stories, this statement comes as no surprise. The gospels do disagree on the details of Jesus’ birth . . .the gospels who tell it . . .which Mark and John don’t. Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth through the eyes of Joseph. The angel, not named Gabriel, announces to Joseph that Mary will bear a son. There’s no mention of a manger or inn or stable in Matthew, nor shepherds . . .only Luke includes those details. But Matthew does mention the wise men, of which we do not know whether there were 3 of them, only that they brought 3 gifts.

Luke’s version of the story is the one we’re really familiar with and cherish. It’s also the one told by Linus in a Charlie Brown Christmas. In Luke we see the birth of Jesus through Mary’s eyes and get our beloved Angel Gabriel, shepherds, manger, stable, census, and angels who declare “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

All the other details, like cattle loing and nasty innkeepers, probably come from the carols we sing.

So Ehrman is right that the gospels disagree about how Jesus’ birth takes place. Ehrman also points out in the article that the birth narratives of the New Testament are historically problematic, and this is true *for . . .and this is a big for*, those people who read the gospels as history. But the gospel aren’t history books, at least not in the way we think of history books. The gospels were written to make a point, and each of them had a different point to make. Luke, whose gospel we’re reading this liturgical year and Advent season, wants to lend some order to the many accounts of Jesus’ life that were circulating around 80 AD/CE, which was 50 years or so after the resurrection and 80 or so after the birth. He’s 2nd or 3rd generation follower of Jesus writing to draw a man by the name of Theophilus deeper into the story of Jesus so that Theophilus can make better sense of what it means to follow Jesus.

So, when you read Luke's gospel this way, rather than as a historical, factual account of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, it begins to make sense why Luke leaves some details out but includes other details. But more importantly, like Theophilus, we too can pick up this story and read it and try to make better sense of how we, too, are called to follow Jesus. What do shepherds and angels and kings and censuses and crowded inns have to do with us? Come along, Luke beckons, and you will not only hear a beautiful story, but you'll also hear one that will transform how you live your life and that will help you chart a path through our complicated, often messy-sometimes violent, but other times remarkably hope-filled, world.

The first story Luke tells which should give all of us hope, is about Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents.

Luke gently describes Elizabeth and Zechariah as "getting on in years", which explains why they don't have children. He then goes on to tell us that one day Zechariah was chosen to perform the sacred, and special duty of making an incense offering to God. It's the honor of a lifetime. But while he's in there, something happens: a vision, a mystical experience, an angel. The angel has a command and an announcement. Zechariah is terrified, of course. "Do not be afraid," the angel commands. "Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son; name him John."

"How in the world is that supposed to happen?" Zechariah says. "We're both old; we're beyond that."

And the angel, who identifies himself by Gabriel, says, "I've been sent by God to tell you this extraordinarily good news. But because you apparently have an imagination deficit, not to mention a lack of confidence and trust, you're not going to speak again until the baby is born." Bam. And renders him mute.

Now if you're a religious professional, a preacher, and you can't talk, you have a big problem here. I suppose every professional has a recurring nightmare of some sort, but for preachers being rendered mute is about the worst. My recurring nightmare is showing up for worship, late, in ragtag clothes, without my sermon. And it's Easter and the place is packed.

So here's old Zechariah, rendered mute while his congregation is waiting for him outside. And when he finally goes back outside to greet them, all he can do is make some hand gestures. It's a nightmare for any preacher.

But I suspect there's a little bit of Zechariah in all of us. Not in the sense that we've been rendered mute, but Like Zechariah, we've talked ourselves into a state of unbelief. We no longer expect God to work any miracles. We might think we, too, are getting on in years, getting too old for God to do anything useful with us. Or maybe we've lowered our expectations for what is possible with God; maybe we're grumpy-Zechariah was

grumpy. “How in the world is that supposed to happen?” Zechariah says. “We’re both old; we’re beyond that.”

Or maybe we pray, but we no longer expect God to answer our prayers. Maybe we go through the motions of worship and prayer and no longer expect to meet God us in our daily lives.

Or maybe, when we hear horrific news of shootings, we think God long ago left the world and has left it up to us to clean up the mess people make.

I suspect at some point or another in all of our lives, we’ve been Zechariah. We have talked ourselves into believing that for God, some things are impossible.

And yet, Elizabeth does conceive. God did do the impossible. Which left Zechariah alone with his thoughts for 9 long months. Maybe during that time he re-read the prophets, but this time he read them with renewed hope. Maybe, in his 9 month silence, he meditated on how God has turned around many dire situations.

One thing is for certain, Zechariah changed during his 9 month time-out; his personality changed and his faith changed. When Elizabeth gave birth to John, joy burst forth from Zechariah, the sort of joy that only a new father can feel when he first sees his child.

Bless be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant.

God remembered. God had not left them alone to their own devices. God was faithful.

Here is Zechariah, brimming over with renewed hope and challenging anyone who despairs to believe that it is never too late to wait upon the Lord; that indeed nothing is impossible for God.

In this beautiful story, God shows us that just when we’ve given up hope, hope is not lost. That no matter how dire a situation may be, God is coming, because God is faithful.

I can’t give you any historical facts about the who, what, why, when and where of the story, I can only tell you what we assume to be true. I also can’t prove to you that any of it really happened, but I also don’t feel it necessary to do so.

All I know is that despite all logic, I believe. I believe that somehow, God came down to live in this world, in a most unexpected way to most unsuspecting parents. And that because God came, in the face of devastation there is reason to hope. That indeed, there really is no reason to fear, just like the angel said to Zechariah, because nothing is impossible with God.

A few years ago, in the weeks before Christmas, a woman named Kathy found herself in the hospital, recovering from her second major surgery of the year, and hoping for a miracle. She remembered that a hospital is not a haven of quiet and peace and rest. She had a roommate who smoked in the bathroom and turned the TV on at all hours of the night. Across the hall an elderly woman cried out in pain every three minutes, day and night, night and day. A “code blue” sent emergency personnel and crash carts racing down the halls.

This is Kathy’s story in her own words:

One night as I lay in my hospital bed, hooked up to so many machines I couldn’t even move without help and close to tears from the pain and frustration, I heard a faint sound. Amidst the cries of pain, blaring TVs, and beeping monitors, I swore I heard a different type of sound altogether: a soft, sweet, gentle song. Then it was gone. Was I imagining things?

A few hours later, still awake and trying to block out the sounds of the woman wailing across the hall and the loud, angry voice of my roommate swearing on the telephone, I heard the strange, beautiful sound again. Could it possibly be? No, I must be hearing things.

When the nurse came in to check my vitals, I asked her: was it me? Or was there indeed a very different sound breaking through the harshness of that place?

“Oh,” she said. “It’s tradition here. Every time a baby is born in the nursery, they play Brahms’ lullaby on the loudspeakers.”

A lullaby on the loudspeakers. Floating through the harshness of those halls—a lullaby.

And right then, for the first time since I had come through the emergency room of that hospital, I smiled. I felt hopeful. I felt peace. Lullaby on the loudspeakers: a baby is born!

During the remaining time I spent in the hospital, I listened for the sounds of that lullaby. Amidst the horrible sounds of pain and misery that surrounded me, I strained to hear the sound of hope, of life, of new beginnings. Lullaby on the loudspeakers. A child is born.

And I thought of another lullaby, which broke into the sounds of the night nearly two thousand years ago, and in my heart, I heard the whisper of angels’ wings:

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Do not be afraid, for over the sounds of people weeping and IVs beeping, over the cries of pain and suffering and sorrow, there is a heavenly lullaby: Do not be afraid — I bring you good news, which is for all people. (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, 20 November 2006)

Christmas is the promise that God is faithful; it is the good news that God does not forget us or abandon us.

As Zechariah said:

By the tender mercy of our God
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

May it always be so.

Amen.