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Luke 1:5-25
December 16, 2018

Everlasting Father

Today's closing song, "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" is a French carol originating from the 4th Century AD or earlier. 4th Century! That's 1700 years old! It was part of the sacred eucharist liturgy of St. James and very possibly dates back to the Jerusalem Church of the Apostle Paul's day.

The first line of the opening stanza comes from Habakkuk 2:20, "Let all the earth keep silence before him" and speaks of Christ's coming. The second stanza pronounces that Christ has come to earth in Jesus. The third stanza proclaims that Jesus the Light of the World dispels all darkness. The closing stanza comes from Revelation 4 and paints the picture of the Holy of Holies in the heavenly realm.

This hymn sets the stage for us during Advent...a time in which we are to be silent, expectant, and hopeful...patiently awaiting Jesus' arrival...a time when God will do something extraordinary in our lives.

Zechariah in our scripture story was the priest on duty one day when God showed up and did something extraordinary. His job was "to keep the incense burning on the altar in front of the Most Holy Place in the temple. He supplied it with fresh incense before the morning sacrifice and again after the evening sacrifice. Ordinarily a priest would have this privilege infrequently, and sometimes never, since duty assignments were determined by casting lots."¹

This just happened to be Zechariah's lucky day!

As he would light the incense, smoke would arise from the Most Holy Place in the temple prompting all the worshipers outside to pray. Zechariah was no doubt praying on behalf of his people but also there was one impossible request that lingered on Zechariah's heart. A child for him and his wife Elizabeth.

Would you join me as we read together this amazing story about our Everlasting Father from Luke 1:5-25.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

As I studied this text this past week there are several things that I like to lift up for us today.

The first thing, and gentlemen please take note...no matter how old our wives may be...never ever refer to her as being "well along in age!" Even if we're speaking to an angel. Got it! In Zechariah's case, maybe we can chock it nerves and the fact that Gabriel caught him off guard.

¹ *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), see Footnote 1:9 on page 1665.

In all serious, though, I think this story tells us something important about God's character as our Everlasting Father. First that God's ways are not our ways. Second that we should expect extraordinary things happen as we worship the Lord. Third, as we learned last week, disappointment and grief are the seedbed from which God often produces his best work. Fourth that when God shares his plans with us, we need to believe and not question God's ability to do what he said. And finally sometimes even though it seems like God is being silent, it's not that he isn't at work. It may just take a period of silence for us to be ready to receive the gifts he's about to birth.

The first nugget that we catch today is a time tried truth that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not often our thoughts. They are so much higher.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had hoped that life would have turned out differently. Being childless back then showed divine disfavor and resulted in social reproach. And yet, Luke clearly states, "Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were upright the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." Their inability to have children had nothing to do with their faithfulness.

The burden fell on God's plan and God's time in their lives.

Sometimes there's no right explanation for why certain things happen to some people and not others. In those moments when we are faced with people asking questions why me or why not me Lord...it's often best to keep our mouths shut and remain silent. Zechariah's prayers are indicative of a deep heart wound that may not have answers this side of heaven. We just need to grieve with these folks and pray for God's comfort.

The next thing we see is that extraordinary things can happen as we gather to worship the Lord.

Notice that Zechariah is in the midst of worship when he receives this awesome news from the Lord.

The same was true for Hannah in 1 Samuel.² Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah. We are told that Elkanah's first wife Peninnah had children but Hannah did not. One day Hannah was pouring out her bitter lament in the temple during worship when Eli the High Priest overheard her. He had pity on her and prayed that the Lord would grant her the desire of her heart. A son whom she would dedicate to the Lord if it ever came to be.

God came through, Hannah conceived and has Samuel who she dedicated to the Lord's service.

The truth here isn't so much that God is some genie in the sky that dispenses our prayer requests whenever we ask...but that Hannah had such a keen awareness

² 1 Samuel 1:2-2:21

of God's presence in her life that she felt free to be honest with God in the context of worship and was not afraid to tell God exactly what she was feeling and thinking.

Worship is one of those primes for our spiritual pumps. The music, prayers, scripture, sermon, offerings, and sacraments create a spiritually charged environment where anything can happen. God can show up and speak to us today.

Do we come with that kind of expectancy? Or has our worship become so predictable that we don't expect the Lord's presence?

Our Everlasting Father wants us to know that he is here with us.

Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in his name, that he is here with us."³

If you could ask the Lord one thing this Christmas, what would it be? Would you be willing to be vulnerable enough to lay it before God today as our spiritual act of worship?

Jesus said, "Which of you fathers, if your child asks for a fish, will give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, will give them a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."⁴

Hannah's story and Zechariah's story seem to overlap a good bit. Don't they? I'm sure that Zechariah's prayers that day were equally full of grief and disappointment with God. Which leads to my third point in this story.

As we saw last week with Mary's hopes and dreams amidst the news that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, disappointment and grief are sometimes the seedbed from which God produces something awesome in our lives. Sometimes it takes being stuck in the pit of despair until we are truly willing to resign ourselves into the hands of our Everlasting Father.

The angel Gabriel is pretty thorough with Zechariah how this would all go down and what God's special plans would be for their son John. John, like Samuel, would be holy, set aside for God's purposes. A prophet like Elijah who would...

Break the 400 years silence from God.

Bring us back to God.

Turn parents' hearts back to their children.⁵

Redirect our disobedient paths.

Make us ready for the Lord's coming.

³ Matthew 18:20

⁴ Luke 11:11-13

⁵ From Malachi 4:5-6

Be the voice of one calling: "In the dry and barren seasons of our lives, prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."⁶

It wasn't until I had experienced some professional disappointment and grief with my career years ago that I was truly open to the idea of full-time ministry. If I hadn't experienced that disappointment, my calling could have charted a very different course. But as it was, in the depth of that despair, God had my attention in ways like none other.

Are we in a season of disappointment and grief right now? Have we give our attentions to God? God may want to speak to us in a special way this Christmas season. Then let us offer our heartfelt laments to God as our act of worship. And let us listen for what God tells us might come next.

If I am to be honest, I am a little perplexed why Zechariah illicit such a different response from the Angel Gabriel than Mary when their questioning of "How it will all be" seems so similar. As an angel, Gabriel must be able to see into Zechariah's heart. The issue wasn't one of innocent confusion. It was one of flat-out disbelief. The idea that God couldn't do what Gabriel said would happen. Mary's questioning is more innocent wonder than disbelief. Do we see the difference between the two?

My fourth point is that we need to believe that God will follow through with what we are told. God is more than able to do what we ask. We can still question. But we can't question God's ability to do it.

I believe that Zechariah was looking more toward his human understanding than in God's awesome power. After so many years of unanswered prayers, perhaps Zechariah was a little skeptical that God would follow through. As a result, Zechariah is left speechless. Unable to share with others his encounter with the living God.

And finally, sometimes even thought it seems like God is being silent, it's not that he isn't at work. It may just take a period of silence for us to meditate, chew one, digest, and wait for them to come to fruition. Imagine 400 years of silence from the last time a prophet Malachi had spoken for God.

But what could God have been doing in that time?

In the 4th Century BC, four hundred years before Jesus' birth, Alexander the Great from Greece took over the Middle East. Cities were constructed, libraries set up, and Greek became the official language of the region. The Hebrew scriptures, called the Septuagint, were translated into Greek making them accessible for non Jewish people to read.

⁶ Isaiah 40:3

In the 2nd Century BC, Rome conquered the territory from Greece and developed a systems of roads that made travel around the area much easier. The first information highway before the Guttenburg Press and the Internet. So with the Hebrew scriptures available to non Jewish people and Roman roads in place, the stage was set for Jesus' coming. Word that the Messiah had come would be known around the world in quick order.

Silence? Sure seemed like it to the Jewish people.

But just because we don't hear from God doesn't mean that God stops working.⁷

No doubt Zechariah and Elizabeth, treasured, pondered, meditated upon these things in their hearts. Things that probably didn't quite even make sense for many many years later.

What are we pondering our hearts this Christmas season? Are we struggling to believe that God is powerful enough to come through with what we are asking? Are we mourning the loss of something we had hoped but didn't come through? Or are we sitting in silence amidst God's seeming inactivity?

Whatever it might be, may we not give up our spiritual act of worship and believing that God has the power to do just what we've asked. May we resign ourselves into God's hands and trust that God is still working despite the silence we may be experiencing. And may we faithfully trust that our Everlasting Father knows what we need and will work everything out for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purposes.⁸

⁷ Ideas taken from Ed Rowell's sermon "Zechariah: A Song of Faith" posted on Preaching Today at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2008/october/zechariah.html>.

⁸ Romans 8:28