

Last Monday and Tuesday and even this morning it was fun to run into some people who had been in worship last Sunday, and they said, “Hallelujah!, and I shouted back, “Praise the Lord!” One person looked at me and said, “You know I learned something.” Isn’t that what each of us does on our faith journeys?! We learn something or believe something and then we forget, and we need God working through others to remind us, don’t we?! That’s what happened in biblical times as well. People would forget, especially during desert times, and needed to remember. One of my friends when she got married chose to use sprigs of rosemary in her flowers. Besides smelling good, I asked her why rosemary and in her response, she taught me something. She said that her great-grandmother taught each generation in her family, all who were gardeners, that rosemary is the herb of memory and remembrance so my friend wanted it used on her wedding day to remember not only God’s covenant with her and her fiancé but the couple’s vows made with the community gathered. This is an example of the meaning of memory across generations. On this first Sunday in Advent, as we prepare for Christ’s coming into the world, I brought some rosemary to put in our Advent Wreath. Because “Advent is the Church’s way of observing and remembering, of marking the truth we believe that **God, Emmanuel, came to be with us once, and God is still with us, and God is coming again to set all things right**” (Sarah Bessey, *Field Notes*). We have rosemary here to remember God’s fulfilled promise in the coming of Jesus Christ, as we also look with longing as a community of faith for Christ’s coming again, leaning into God’s future with HOPE. Yes, the Christmas tree and other greens are in

the sanctuary, but it is not yet Christmas. In the next four or so weeks of this Advent season, we'll explore and remember some stories in Luke's Gospel that lead us to Christ's coming into the world. Today we start at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel with the story only told by Luke of Zechariah and Elizabeth- better known as the parents of John the Baptist. For many reasons, these two are great to start us out in the season of Advent. But before we read today's Gospel story, let us look at the big picture context first. "For about a thousand years, from Moses to Malachi, God spoke to God's people Israel by sending them prophets. Abraham was the first person to be called a prophet (Gen. 20:7), but it was with Moses that Israel's prophetic institution took shape. Across the centuries God sent significant men and yes, even women prophets like Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14). Malachi was Israel's last prophet, as his book comes last in the Old Testament and was chronologically the latest as well. Malachi wrote about 100 years after the exiles had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon (c. 450 BC). But after Malachi there was a 400 plus year prophetic silence. In other words, the Israelites heard nothing from God during this time...that is until today's story takes place, linking directly from Malachi to John the Baptist" (journeywithjesus.net, Dec. 10th 2006). Today's story is a story of God's faithfulness and what that faithfulness looks like through the annunciation or the bringing of news from the angel Gabriel telling Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, will have a baby and will name him John. This story makes us think of another couple in the Bible up in age who are barren and are told they will have a child. That's right....Abraham and Sarah, which clues us in

that God is at work here in patterns familiar from the Old Testament: listen for “the casting of lots, a vision in the temple, a heavenly messenger, a promise, a sign, and a childless old couple” (*Interpretation*, Fred. B. Craddock). Before turning to God’s Word for us today, first, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in **Luke 1:5-25.** **READ.**

I don’t know about y’all, but I find comfort in biblical characters such as Zachariah and Elizabeth. They are ordinary people who are trying their best to be faithful and yet don’t always have unwavering faith. Yet, God is still God- working in and through the avenues of life in the ordinary believing community. Here “The old (in this case, an old couple) will usher in the new” (Craddock). Zechariah is a priest in a family of priests- his people? Descendants of Aaron, Moses’ brother. Elizabeth is a descendant of Aaron as well. However, Aaron’s family had 24 divisions named for his 24 sons (1 Chron. 24:1-19). We’re told that Zechariah is in the Abijah division and that it is his division’s turn to serve at the altar of the temple in Jerusalem. When on duty at the altar, each division draws lots to discern which ONE priest God is choosing to burn incense on the altar within the Holy Place. If chosen, this was THE life dream for many priests, as not all were chosen in their lifetimes. Yet on this particular night, Zechariah was chosen. While alone in the holy of holy places in the temple, Gabriel comes to Zechariah and tells him this BIG news that Zechariah doubts causing him to be made mute until after John the Baptist is born and circumcised. Luke’s description of Gabriel, one of the seven archangels of late Judaism, fits the pattern of Gabriel’s visit to Daniel in the book of Daniel in the OT (9:20-10:15) (Craddock).

Zechariah is delayed coming out of the temple to bless the crowd, and they begin to wonder where he is. When he comes out and can't speak, he gestures, and they figure out that he must have had a vision from God. Can you imagine being Zechariah in what was supposed to be his big moment but instead of a verbal blessing, he gets to play a round or two of charades or Pictionary to communicate with the gathered people there waiting. Or can you imagine Zechariah communicating this message to his wife, Elizabeth, without spoken words?

Though Elizabeth and Zechariah were ordinary, they represent communal memory- you know the older generations in the family or church who pass on memories and faith to the younger generations. What would we lose if we left them out in the telling of the story of Jesus' birth? One cannot deny that there are some things in today's Gospel story that make you go hmmm. Things such as although Zechariah was a rather common name in biblical times, isn't it odd that the first words from God to God's people in 400 years came to someone whose name means "the Lord has remembered?" Yes, Zechariah's name in Hebrew means "to remember." Maybe though it didn't seem to the Jewish people living under Roman rule that the Lord had remembered?! Zechariah also had never been chosen to be THE priest to burn the incense until this one night when Gabriel appeared before him?! In Malachi, the last book of the OT, the prophet ends with a faint promise of a future hope. This WAS the last word from God but a new day was dawning...the faint hope of Malachi would be fulfilled after four centuries of apparent silence from God through John the Baptist. These

words from Malachi are echoed here in Gabriel's words about John being equipped as a prophet with the spirit and power of Elijah- turning the hearts of fathers back to their children...(Malachi 4:5-6). And as we'll find out next week, Elizabeth and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are relatives.

Although Luke doesn't tell us much about Elizabeth, "I have always wondered about her; what it was like to live that long with her unanswered prayers and still cultivate the sort of faith that made her 'righteous before God.' How did her prayers bear open her heart to God in deepening vulnerability, and what did she do with her longing each time she failed to conceive a child? Like so many women today, Elizabeth's story is only partially told. You have to dig for the whole truth, and even then you come up short. You have to look behind the seemingly happy ending, and remember that she was a woman whose life was probably shaped by sorrow, discomfort, doubt, pain and yearning. Somehow Elizabeth seems to grasp after hope one more time after years of bitter disappointment"

(<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/women-gospels-enuma-okoro>).

Despite all that you know about God do you sometimes still doubt- like Zechariah and probably also Elizabeth- that God will come through...that God will provide? I know I sometimes do.

John's birth announcement from Gabriel to his father-to-be, Zechariah, is a lot for John's old man to take in let alone what his son-to-be will do. Think about all Zechariah had to process: the pregnancy news, the gender reveal, the birth announcement (annunciation), the naming, the

upbringing, the career announcement- all these results rolled into one. It's like God just said to Zechariah, "This is how it's all going to go down. Just trust me." Easier said than done, right? But understandably, Zechariah responds much like Abram and Sarai to this news. He asks Gabriel, "How can I be sure of this? I'm an old man and my wife is getting on in years?" This is Zechariah asking for a sign from a sign, the angelic visitor, Gabriel. But Gabriel is not amused at all, and he makes Zechariah mute until John is born because Zechariah didn't believe this good news. And we're told that Elizabeth kept to herself for five months giving God all the credit for what was happening both within and outside of her.

So, why does Luke begin his Gospel with this story of Zechariah and Elizabeth instead of with Mary and Joseph? Maybe because we, too, need to remember as a community of faith that God is always faithful? When our life leads us to the intersection of fear and faith, we often look at God's promises and think to ourselves, "How can I know for sure?" Though God certainly calls for us to trust in God, we can still have hope when we falter. "Zechariah's doubt did not weaken God's power. His doubt didn't stop his son, John, the forerunner to Jesus, from being born and preparing the way for Jesus. When your own legs of faith start to wobble, take courage and have hope, because nothing can stop God's promises" (shereadstruth.com). When we feel the absence of the divine, when we think there is no reason to hope, we call out to God to help us remember, because we can remember with the saints who have gone before us. We can do so because we know that the covenant is permanent" (A.J. Levine, *Light of the World*). So as we wait gathered

around our Advent wreath infused with rosemary, let us be open to the staggering news of God's work in the world and faithfully hope for what may seem impossible. Let us remember God's faithfulness to many, many generations before us and how they've passed the memories on to us, as well as their faith. May we remember and have hope, as we trust while praying, "God, who hears the prayers of all, be the God you have promised to be." Amen.