

“Sign Posts”
Luke 1:57-80
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
12-15-13

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of this word inspire it in our hearing, as well. Amen, and you can be seated.

Living a life of following Christ is a journey. And in these last three weeks, we have looked at the aspects of a journey. First, you have to realize you’re far off and then decide to turn around and head home. Second, like Mary, we will face the decision at some point in our lives of whether we will surrender our lives to God and obey his call. From there, we begin the way back to intimacy with our Lord.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that on December 26th, Amy and I will pack up our family and hit the road. (Can you tell I'm just a little excited about it?) And if you've ever taken a substantial and highly anticipated car trip, you know the two most exciting moments of the trip are what? The departure and the arrival. Everything else in between is sort of a crap shoot. For us, making it to Chicago is the first challenging leg. This side of Chicago, Minnesota still feels like a far off country. But something happens as the monotony of the road between Rockford and Madison starts to lull us into disbelief that we will ever arrive—a sign post pops up: St. Paul 275 miles.

This visual cue reminds us that yes, there is still a destination up ahead, and we are indeed moving toward that fulfillment of the journey.

You know I run into people in ministry all the time who, when the topic of Advent comes up, you see them sort of slump down, like Advent is a burden. When you talk to them, all they seem to focus on is how much they have to do, and it's like all the joy of the message, all the anticipation of the mystery, all the hope of the resolution that comes in the birth of the Savior has been replaced with the burden of a laundry list of stuff to do. We've replaced the wonder with a responsibility. That is why I think Zechariah and Elizabeth are such important figures for us as we seek to rekindle the excitement of Advent.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, two people who biologically have no business having kids, have just bore a son. Earlier in Luke's gospel, Zechariah the priest, on behalf of his community, stepped foot into the holy of holies to offer sacrifices every day. This in and of itself should have been the single most awe-inspiring job of his life. But perhaps even he, as he stood in that most sacred of places, began to just go through the motions. So that when the angel tells him he and Elizabeth are going to have a son, Zechariah's immediate response is one of disbelief. *You must have the wrong guy, I'm about to start collecting social security, not changing diapers.*

What happens in this moment is not joy and celebration but disbelief. Wonder and worship are replaced with reason and doubt. Zechariah the priest needs someone to repeat the message of what God is doing through Israel. Even Zechariah needed to be reminded that God was still at work and God was still coming just as he had promised so many times before.

So what does God do? He shuts up his mouth. It's as if God is saying, "Zechariah, I'm going to give you a little alone time to think about it what you've been told over and over again."

You know here on campus, we do a lot of work using the Internet. And at the center of our office, at the desk of my assistant Kari, is the source of our internet, and it goes out from there. But if you know anything about signals that get transmitted, which I don't—obviously, that's why I'm in ministry—you know that a signal can only travel so far before it starts to lose its strength. And so what do you need? A repeater. A repeater is a device that takes the signal, beefs it up, and sends it forward to the next location.

All throughout the Scriptures and in our history as a Church, God has used kingdom repeaters who come to people who have lost the vision, lost the hope, lost the excitement that God is at work in their lives, and what these kingdom repeaters do is to shake the people of God up. They shake 'em up, even disorient them, and then fill 'em back up with God's message of hope and promise and send 'em forward renewed.

God used Abraham to rekindle the hope that God had not abandoned his people. And through Abraham, God rekindled hope that there was still a plan at work. God told Abraham in his old age, "I'm going to make a great nation out of you, 'cause I'm not through with you yet."

God used Moses to shake up the people of God who had gotten so accustomed to living in bondage that they said to one another, "You know, this isn't so bad." Moses shook 'em up to say, "No, there is still something greater in store."

God used Elijah to renew the courage to believe that there was only one God in Israel and Baal wasn't it, and then had a little competition to prove it.

God used Isaiah and Micah the prophets, who kept telling the story that God still had a place in the world for Israel, and that Zion and its people would be the light of the world.

God showed the prophet Ezekiel a vision of a land void of life, filled with desolation, to remind the people that even though everything around them was nothing but destruction, there was still a river that flowed with healing waters and that the Spirit of God could still breathe life into these dry bones.

God used a man named Zephaniah to captivate the minds and hope of the people of God and show them what God could do for the entire world because he had already done it in them.

And God stopped up the ears of Zechariah the priest so that he could finally hear the story he knew so well, that had been drowned out by years of simply doing church and doing ministry. Friends, have our ears been stopped up? Have our eyes been blinded? Have our hearts been hardened? And have our minds been dulled to the mystery and the opportunity and the possibility and the excitement of the Gospel, the good news that the Creator of the universe ain't through with us yet?

You know, I was thinking about this. Maybe this is what Zechariah needed at this moment. And you know what? Maybe this is what the church needs every so often, someone or something that will repeat and boost the message. So many Christians out there have lost the sense of wonder and excitement and expectation about their faith. People get so burdened by their circumstances and the things going on that they no longer have a sense that God is at work in them and wants to use them in the building of the kingdom of God.

This excites me, this is why sometimes my voice raises and sometimes I move around up here, because I'm excited and I happen to believe that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world and without him, we're dead!

By the time their little miraculous boy was born, Zechariah had had lots of time to just sit and meditate in the stillness. I mean, what else is he going to do? But Zechariah has spent nine months having his gray hair blown back because his mouth wasn't getting in the way. Zechariah might be a lot like us, in that he got so comfortable in his religiosity that he'd lost the belief that God can and does show up and do amazing things in our lives every day. Zechariah has an opportunity to rekindle wonder, reignite the flame, and re-imagine the wonder of God's work in his life. So that when that little miraculous child is born, Zechariah's mouth is opened and he declares the praise and glory of God.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.”

Have we become too comfortable and too routine in our religiosity that we have lost the dream that God has for our lives, lost the promise that you were created for something special? Because the one who created you said, “You are special, so much so that I will stop at nothing, not even dying to be with you.” Have we become too comfortable in the fact that things are pretty much ok? That the message has become almost a whisper? Sometimes we need the truth in our lives repeated because we've lost the power, lost the significance, lost the hope that what the Scriptures say God will do then and in the future long, long from now, God will do in your life right now. We need it repeated because our ears get stopped up and our tongues get too loud, our minds get too clogged, and our hearts get numb with disappointment after disappointment. It is time once again to rejuvenate, church.

Duane Miller was a man who was minister at the second largest Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, and in 1990, he came down with a viral infection in one of his vocal chords that basically took away his ability to speak above a whisper. Without a voice, how is a preacher to preach, or a teacher to teach? And within just a few months, the church had to let him go. He lost his job, lost his call, lost his house and much of his income. He's doing odd jobs just to survive. He is at the bottom in terms of depression and despair. And every day, he prays, “Lord, what is happening?” And every day the Lord tells him, “Just be faithful, just be faithful.” So he picks himself up out of the pit and he finds a microphone and sound system that is able to make his voice loud enough to where he can speak.

So he went from small church to small church. He'd teach wherever they'd let him. He shows up, he's obedient, he does what he supposed to do, and people's lives start to be affected by his ministry. So the church he once led invites him back to preach, and on the Sunday he's there, he's teaching on the standard Baptist text for that morning: Psalm 103, which begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and bless his holy name,” and he gets to verse three and you can audibly hear this – it's really amazing – he gets to verse three where it

says, “who forgives you all your sins and heals,” and when he gets to the word “heal” you hear his voice go from this...to this rich deep full normal voice. But here’s what was different for Zechariah and Duane Miller: it was in the practice of his faith, not just going through the motions, but actively believing in the person of the practice that Duane Miller expected God to show up. And when God did, he and all those around that day praised God together because they believed that God had done something miraculous in their sight.

The hope of Advent is that we, too, can rekindle the hope and faith that God is at work in the world, doing something great.