

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Luke 1:1-23

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

December 3, 2023

## **A New Story**

It's hard to believe, but here we are on this first Sunday of Advent. Another season of preparation, anticipation, and reflection as we prepare to welcome the Christ child and the hope that comes from a babe in a manger. We are moving into these weeks with the Advent theme and question, "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?" And we begin today by acknowledging the weariness, grief, rage and hopelessness we carry, while also affirming that we are made for joy. As you know by now, this will be my last season of Advent with you all, so I am definitely feeling all of the feelings as we come into this season together. As we come into this season alongside this theme, I think it's important for us to acknowledge our weariness in general. There is so much going on in our world and within each of our lives and within the life of the church. So how can we come into this season outside of the commercialism hustle and bustle and instead remember what it offers here in this space? In this sanctuary?

Today, we begin with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The story tells us that they have battled infertility and have lived many years steadfast in their faith. In a culture that placed worth and value around having children and childbearing, you know that these two have felt the weight of hopes and dreams unattained. They know grief deeply. Instead of turning against God in the midst of their despair, scripture tells us that they continue to walk with God.

This specific part of the Christmas story is rarely preached during the Advent season. We usually hear about the baby John leaping in Elizabeth's womb after Mary comes to their home, but rarely do we get to hear about Zechariah, whose part of the story is actually told in a lot more depth than you might remember. Because if you hold his story and Mary's story side by side, they are very similar in a lot of ways. The angel Gabriel appears to both of them-both of them are initially terrified and the angel's first words to both of them is "Do not be afraid." The angel then shares the message of what is to come and what is to be that will change both of their lives forever.

The major difference is after hearing the angel's proclamation, Zechariah asks doubtfully, "How can this be? How will I know this is so? I'm old and so is my wife" whereas Mary responds thoughtfully, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

As I sat with Zechariah's response this week, I'll be honest, I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. Because listen, there's nothing wrong with doubting or having doubts when it comes to matters of faith. But I laughed because an ANGEL of God just told him what's going to happen and he still questions it. "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." He cannot believe it. And whatever this angel looked like, I am guessing it was not some kind of chubby, cute angel cherub we've seen portrayed in Renaissance paintings...the being that stood next to him was likely terrifying in appearance because Zechariah's initial response was terror (as is everyone in scripture who comes across an angel by the way). Fear overwhelmed him, scripture tells us. So, even just on a basic instinctive level, why would you ever question a terrifying being standing next to you?

Clearly, the angel is annoyed. He just shared this incredible news with Zechariah. And unlike the message that comes to Mary later, where her life will be at risk of losing everything, the message that comes to Zechariah will only bring him and his family more honor and status. He's just heard GOOD NEWS, and his immediate response was to cast doubt and to speak doubt-to shut it down without even giving it a second to sink in-to pause and consider who it is that is speaking to him or to consider how his words and response might affect the other. His own experience is more important and more real and so he speaks without thinking.

He thinks he knows better than a terrifying angel and so he questions the angel's authority.

And so the angel responds: 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

It seems harsh, but Zechariah basically gets placed on a nine month timeout from being able to say anything. Let all mortal flesh keep silence, y'all.

I imagine that for this priest, who is used to having a voice, losing it the way he did and for how long he did, must have been quite the humbling experience.

Zechariah is promised the child they had been praying so long to get. The angel declares that he and Elizabeth will have joy and gladness and that many will rejoice at his birth. This child will be great and turn people toward God-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

So why didn't Zechariah believe the angel?

I read somewhere this week that maybe Zechariah was reluctant to believe this good news that Elizabeth would bear them a son because he thought he already knew his own story. After all, this has been his reality for a long time. Why and how could it be different? Maybe he had become so comfortable with the story he told himself and the story that others told him about what his life was that he could not believe another story was possible. Maybe he had become so comfortable with the identity of “childless old couple” that even as he prayed for children, he stopped believing that it would ever actually happen.

What about you? What is the story you have told yourself about who you are that you cannot imagine a new reality and new story for who you may becoming?

What about us as Stone Church? What is the story we have told ourselves about who we are that we cannot imagine a new reality and new story for who Stone Church may becoming?

And so I wonder if maybe this time of forced silence was what allowed Zechariah to **receive** a new story... a new story about who he was and what new possibilities could be.

Imagine it with me. Zechariah could not speak as he saw the first kicks through Elizabeth’s growing belly or speak words of comfort to her as she was sick. He could only observe, move with her, assist her as needed and LISTEN. He spent 9 months listening, paying attention, probably saying a lot of silent prayers and holding witness to what they thought could never happen for them. He was there when Mary showed up at their door also newly pregnant and couldn’t say anything about whether or not she could stay or talk about his similar experience with the angel Gabriel. He was there and listened when Elizabeth exclaimed that the child leaped in her womb upon Mary’s arrival and pondered what that could mean. Mary stays with them for months...so he sees new life growing in both of these women. He bears witness to all of this and cannot say a word.

I wonder, how much would he have missed had he been able to speak through it all or interrupted or chimed in? Or rather, I wonder how much his perspective **expanded** because he was forced to listen, observe, and bear witness rather than respond right away. And so friends, maybe the lesson today from Zechariah’s story and experience is an invitation to listen for a new story or a seeing a new way of understanding the old story that we have about ourselves, about the church, about the world.

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, can you receive a new story today? Can we acknowledge our weariness and then open ourselves up to the truth that a new possibility is possible? What is the narrative that you are telling yourself about who

you are that is limiting the real possibilities of what God wants to do in and through you? What is the narrative that we are telling ourselves about who we are as a church that might be limiting the real possibilities of what God wants to do in and through us? What is the script that is limiting you today from receiving a new story and a new possibility-a new hope-from our God?

Friends, in this season of Advent, perhaps our challenge is to simply find space to be silent so that we can be opened to what else is possible. Can we do that? Can we listen for what God is telling us by observing what is unfolding around us with faith and not fear? Again, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber articulates it so beautifully. She writes, “What *was* the Christ event if not God telling this faithless and heart-breaking world that a different story is possible. Telling us that God was, God is and God will continue redeeming all of creation through means that we would never come up with ...through means like pregnant old ladies, and messiahs born amongst sheep and straw and loving the enemy and forgiveness of sins and self-giving love and resurrection of wounded bodies.”

Friends, it was through those months of silence that Zechariah was able to see a story unfold that he could have never come up with himself. He got to see and experience things in a new way that he probably wasn’t used to doing. I am sure there were moments of frustration and fatigue and wondering if his voice would ever come back. But he got to experience a new reality and in the end it would lead to a song of prophetic joy.

In a few moments, we will gather around this Table where we are being called to carve out space for God’s love in the center of our being so that no matter what script we tell ourselves about who we are, that we might trust the angel’s proclamation to each of us when they say “Do not be afraid.” May a new story unfold as we gather together again until the day when joy overpowers weariness and when there is room for all at every table.

Listen, observe, bear witness. And may you see what expands within you, what new story is birthed through you and around you so that we can live into what God is calling us to do and to be even in all that is unknown. May we perceive it and may we believe it. Amen.