

Advent 1C, Luke 1:1-25, December 2, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

For the next four weeks we will listen to the entire first chapter of Luke's gospel, divided into four segments. We do this in order to hear the account of Jesus' birth in chapter 2 in the way Luke wants us to hear it. That will come, of course, at Christmas. But now we are in Advent, a time of preparation and making ready for the birth of the savior. Luke's first chapter tells us how God made ready his people, and the world.

Before we start in with the gospel reading we just heard it's important to understand just a bit about the gospel of Luke. He is not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. Rather he draws upon the accounts of others, even the apostles themselves. He writes in a sophisticated style; his audience is most likely Greek speaking Gentiles who have converted to following Christ. He addressed his gospel to a man named "Theophilus," which means "Lover of God." This Theophilus could be a real person, or it could simply mean anyone who loves God and desires to know more about how God is redeeming the world through his Son Jesus Christ. That's how I want us to hear the gospel, as those who love God and want to know more.

Luke opens his gospel, not with Jesus or even Mary, but with the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. This husband and wife are childless, which at the time would have made Elizabeth the subject of pity and scorn. They are both getting on in years, as Luke tells us. Here's where we need to note something significant. Does the fact that the first thing Luke tells is about an aging childless couple remind you of anything? It should. Luke is pointing us back to Abraham and Sarah, way back in the book of Genesis. He also wants us to remember another couple yearning for a child, Elkanah and Hannah who are the parents of Samuel the prophet. Just as in those stories from the Old Testament Luke wants us to see how God is at work fulfilling the yearnings and longings of his people.

So who are Zechariah and Elizabeth? In many ways they are ordinary people. Zechariah is a priest in Israel. He doesn't seem extraordinary. There would have been hundreds of other priests. He just happened to draw by lot the duty to go inside the Temple and offer the incense. It was an important religious ritual, but nothing out of the ordinary. His wife Elizabeth was back home, in some village in the Judean hill country. Just two ordinary Jews, faithful and devoted to God, going about their business and daily routine.

Then, all of a sudden, an angel appears. Amidst the rising smoke of incense it must have been a terrifying sight. Put out of your mind the cute and beautiful angels on your mantle, or sitting on a shelf. This is the kind of angel that causes you to sink to your knees in fright, cover your face, and hope he doesn't burn you

up. Angels always seem to say, “Don’t be afraid.” That’s because whenever they appear people are afraid. They know they are in the presence of a messenger from God, even in the presence of God himself.

This angel announces to Zechariah that he and his wife are going to become parents. The whole plan is laid out of them. The child will be a boy, you’re going to name him John, folks will rejoice. He will be great in God’s eyes. He won’t get distracted with drinking because he’s going to be about God’s business of getting people ready for the coming of the Lord. Just like Elijah, that great prophet of old, your son will go out and turn people around and get them on the right path to meet God.

You would think old Zechariah might rejoice at this piece of good news. Here God is telling him that a child he and Elizabeth have longed for, have prayed for, is going to be born and what does Zechariah say? “How is it possible? Have you seen my wife? She’s getting a bit long in the tooth, and I’m an old man?” Not faith, not joy, rather skepticism and doubt. Zechariah wants some kind of sign that all this is going to come true. And the angel, now almost rearing up in indignation, gives Zechariah the sign he wants. But it’s a sign that comes in the form of punishment. He won’t be able to speak a word until the promise is fulfilled and the child is born.

This story is meant to be both serious and somewhat comical. Out of the temple comes Zechariah, silent but waving his arms around trying to communicate. They know he’s seen something but he can’t say what it was. Luke gives us the little detail that Zechariah continues in his service in the temple even though he’s mute. When he’s finished he returns home. Elizabeth becomes pregnant, and she rejoices that she will no longer be mocked for her childlessness.

There are at least two levels to this story. There is the big story, of course. This is about announcing the birth of John the Baptist who will emerge as an adult later on in the story. He will announce the coming of the Lord, getting people ready by urging them to repent and turn to God. John the Baptist is the connection between the longing and expectation of God’s people in the Old Testament for a savior, a messiah. That’s why Luke begins with John and not Jesus. Not because John is more important; he’s not. But God always prepares people for what is to come. And John is the one who will help that happen.

But there’s another level to this story that’s important as well. That’s the very human level. Zechariah and Elizabeth are purposely not made out to be heroes of faith. They are simply ordinary people. Faithful, devoted, yes, but also full of doubts and maybe even disappointment. They go about their duties with a dogged determination. Even though this is the story of God’s salvation of the whole world, it reminds us of something incredibly important. God regularly works through ordinary people, doing what they normally do, with a mixture of half-faith and

devotion, holding themselves ready for whatever God has in mind. The needs and hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in the midst of this larger story. Because that's who God is. When God acts on the large scale, saving the world from sin and death, God also takes care of smaller, yet significant, human concerns as well.

Which means you and I are never lost in the sight of God. Our concerns, our hopes and our fears, our worries and our joys, are all contained within the realm of God. Luke has begun to tell the story of God who comes to us, who reaches down from heaven and joins us. Here. Where the extraordinary meets ordinary. Where heaven meets earth. Where God meets us. Amen.