

Advent 4C 2018, Luke 1:57-80, December 23, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Three Sundays ago we began reading the first chapter of Luke's gospel. As I mentioned at the time we do so in order better to appreciate hearing the story of Jesus' birth which will be announced tomorrow at Christmas Eve worship. Jesus' birth doesn't just happen. There's preparation. There are adults who matter before the baby even appears. Jesus is born into a family; an extended family. He doesn't just have a mother and an adopted father. He's got a cousin, and an aunt and uncle. On the one hand he's not like us: he is the Son of God, savior of the world. But on the other hand he's just like us: he's got a family, a hometown, and the adults themselves are caught up in the whole story.

You remember Zechariah and Elizabeth. They first appeared three weeks ago, on the first Sunday in Advent. Zechariah the priest in the Temple in Jerusalem receives an angelic visitor telling him he and his wife Elizabeth are going to be parents. Zechariah hears this and scoffs at the whole idea. So the angel strikes him mute. This doesn't negate the promise of God and prevent Zechariah from becoming a father however. The child promised to these two elderly parents will be the last in a long series of prophets who announce the coming of the Lord, and preparing God's people to receive the Messiah by encouraging them to repent, turn their lives around, to meet the Lord.

That's where we are this morning. The final section of Luke's first chapter tells us the story of the birth of this child. As I said three weeks ago we need to hear this as the humorous story it's meant to be. Zechariah is struck speechless because he refuses to believe the word of God. For nine long months he's had time to think about all that God promised him. I don't know if Elizabeth, his wife, enjoyed this sabbatical of silence, but clearly she's been thinking about everything also. Quite naturally the folks around Zechariah and Elizabeth are happy they are now at long last parents, and so it's quite natural that they all think the baby boy should be named after his father. So first of all his mother Elizabeth puts her foot down and says "no, he's going to be named John." The shocked faces and objections rippled through the community. It would be like coming from a long line of women named Martha and naming your daughter Brunhilda. John just doesn't seem to fit. But remember Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't choose the name. God gave the name to the child. Zechariah, mute all these months, and now seemingly deaf as well, waves and flails his arms and hands around gesturing wildly to his neighbors. Finally he communicates somehow he wants a writing tablet, and in big bold letters, unmistakable to all he writes, "his name is John." This is proof positive that Zechariah's lack of faith when the angel first told him all

that was to happen has now turned to belief. And the first words out of his mouth are praises of God.

Zechariah's song of praise is called the "Benedictus." That's Latin for "Blessed Be" the first two words of his song. We just sang it ourselves a few moments ago as the psalmody. Like Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat, the Benedictus is the overture song to the rest of the gospel. Here Zechariah connects us to Israel's history, to the promises God made to his people to send a king in the line of the great King David. We hear of prophets who promised on God's behalf salvation and rescue from enemies. Zechariah goes all the way back to Abraham, the first to be called by God, the one who received the first promise. That's how praising God sounds; singing praises for both what God has done and what God promises to do.

Remember, these are people who might easily have given up on praising God. It had been a long time since God sent prophets. There hadn't been a king for hundreds of years. Some had learned to accommodate their new masters, the Romans, to go along just to get along. But God preserved a remnant of believers. Men and women like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph. There weren't special people, specially trained. They were ordinary folks. Just going about their daily routines. But they hadn't given up hope in God's promises. Even though the time seemed to stretch out between promise and fulfillment they believed that God would always come through, because God is a God who makes promises and fulfills them.

God sent one final prophet before the final fulfillment of the promise of a savior. Zechariah's song is also about his son, John. "You, child, will be called the prophet of the most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way." In a few weeks, after the Christmas celebrations start to fade away, John will appear in our church's proclamation. He will be grown, standing at the Jordan river announcing the coming kingdom of God. He will baptize people as a sign of repentance, turning away from sin and toward the coming kingdom. Another man will step into that water and John will baptize him, and the public ministry of Jesus will begin. But now, in these stories, all of the promises of God are made while they are just born, or still in their mother's wombs. Sometimes there is a delay between promise and fulfillment. But hope doesn't die because God will always fulfill his promise.

So as we prepare our homes and our hearts to celebrate the birth of the one who is God's greatest fulfillment of his promises, let us remember with thanksgiving all those who came before and are so important to this promise; Zechariah, whose mouth sings God's praises, Elizabeth who greets Mary with praises of God, Mary who praises God for looking upon the lowly with favor. Let

us add our praises of God for saints who have gone before us, who show us the way and point us to God's fulfillment of all his promises. Amen.