

Sermon for December 17, 2006: Darkness and Light, Fear and Joy

Luke 1: 57-80

Human beings are complicated. We so often have mixed feelings – feelings of joy and fear, feelings of celebration and worry. We can feel great joy at a new job, or great relief at surviving a huge cutback, and yet we can still feel concern and worry for our co-workers, who are in tough circumstances, or without jobs. Anyone who has seen the second movie in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, the Two Towers, and who remembers the battle of Helm’s Deep, remembers seeing the shift from the deep darkness of the battle Aragorn, Theodorn, and the elves waged with the orcs to the dazzle of sunrise when Gandalf returns with the Riders of the Mark under Eomer to vanquish the invaders. In that shift from darkness to light, the words of the psalm were evident: mourning comes at night, but joy comes in the morning. And anyone who has ever waited with eager anticipation for the birth of a baby, our own, or that of a loved one, knows how the joy of birth can also carry with it the fear of, “What do we do now?”

The birth of the infant promised to Zechariah and Elizabeth is told in today’s reading. In the text we hear of joy and amazement, and also fear; of blessings and rejoicing, and people talking about their anxiety throughout the countryside. The shift in perspective came about because the people also had to adjust to their own previous lack of expectation of promises fulfilled – the evidence is available to their eyes, and to their ears.

It is amazing to me how quickly we lose our awe of God, and the miraculous things God does in our lives. But people are people – Elizabeth and Zechariah’s neighbors also seem to have forgotten, at least for a moment, the incredible way that God was visibly moving in their midst. The birth of a baby is a cause for rejoicing, and the neighbors rejoiced with Elizabeth as she gave birth to this wondrous baby, who came so unexpectedly. But they seem already to have forgotten what a huge miracle this birth was – Elizabeth was only the second woman who was getting on in years to have a baby, in the history of the Hebrew people – Sarah was first. Now Elizabeth wasn’t as old as Sarah, who, the text says, was 90 when Isaac came along. But the text has emphasized that Elizabeth IS GETTING ON IN YEARS. They rejoice in the Lord’s great mercy, but to a large extent they also are losing track of just how miraculous this birth really is – until – until the time to name this new baby. Given the similarities between Sarah’s pregnancy and Elizabeth’s, one could argue that the new baby should have been named laughter, Isaac, or some other such name that indicated the wondrous way this pregnancy came to be. Or fulfillment, or faithful, or something like that. But the neighbors were way more practical and down-to-earth than that. Custom called for naming babies with family names, and especially with naming firstborn sons after their fathers. Chances are that some of them were already calling this new baby boy Zechariah – but when the time comes, Elizabeth says, “No – he is to be called John.” Well – talk about upsetting custom! So they argue with her, and then turn to Zechariah, who is still mute. They ask him what he wants to name the baby – and he writes, “His name is John.” Immediately Zechariah can speak again, and the first words out of his mouth are words of praise for the Lord. I guess the neighbors around them had just gotten used to Zechariah not being able to speak – and when he finally can, again, they are all afraid – because it forces them all to remember that this baby is indeed unique, as all babies are – and yet this baby is

also different, because the circumstances of his birth are so different from the norm. This baby's birth signals the beginning of a change, a change they SAID they were eager for, and yet a change that, when it was clear that things were changing, struck them with fear – precisely because things WERE changing. “What then will this child become?” It also may have been, “And what will that do to and for us?” The established order of things is about to shift – and what will that do to their lives?

Zechariah, however, has had some time to think about these things, and has embraced the changes that young John will be introducing. He embraces them and praises God because the promises made so long ago, through the prophet Isaiah, are indeed coming true. Isaiah had prophesied that the people would move from a time of darkness to a time of great light. They were going to move from sitting in darkness, sitting in the shadow of death, to experiencing the breaking in of a dawn whose light came from on high. It would be more than a time of light – there would be endless peace, a peace filled with justice and righteousness. And that is what Zechariah refers to in this hymn of praise. Zechariah praises God for His mercy, for His redemption of His people, for His salvation of His people, so that they can continue to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness. And Zechariah praises God for using John, in the future, to be the one who will go before the Lord to prepare His ways. Zechariah knows that the dawn from on high is breaking, to give that long-promised light to those who were sitting in darkness, sitting in that shadow of death, a Light that would guide the peoples' feet into the way of peace.

But I wonder about those neighbors and friends, the ones who had at first talked a lot about that pregnancy, and about Zechariah's mute state, those folks who had so quickly accepted that new norm, those folks who seem to have been caught off-guard by the wonder of this birth, the wonder of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. I wonder how different we are from them. The neighbors and friends so quickly adjusted to the situation – but they lost their sense of wonder. Zechariah had a lot more time to think about things – not being able to talk does give you a lot of time to think – and his time of silence, which was surely punctuated by times of prayer and studying scripture, gave him the chance to become full of wonder and praise and thanksgiving. It made the danger of his situation – because the birth of this young baby would upset the order of things in Israel and Judah – all the more apparent, but it also made God's action in his life all the more apparent.

How can we regain our sense of amazement at what God is doing in our lives? Perhaps we should emulate Zechariah – and spend some time in silence, in prayer and in studying scripture, until we too become full of wonder and praise and thanksgiving. And at this busy time of the year, when too many activities threaten to crowd out the real reason for the season, spending some time in silence, in prayer and in studying scripture may be just the thing to help us to recapture the blessing that lives in Christmas, the blessing of God's only Son, made flesh to dwell among us.

So take the time, as we draw near to the time. Remember God's love for us, and praise God for the mighty things He has done for us, so that we too might serve Him without fear, in holiness and in righteousness, until Jesus returns in glory. Even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Luke 1: 57-80

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has looked favorably on His people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty Savior for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke through the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered His holy covenant, the oath that He swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands 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 by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.