

“The Hidden Christmas Story?”

IV. Zechariah’s Song

Luke 1:5-13, 57-80

ADVENT 4

December 22, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

From September through December, the assigned texts from the Narrative Lectionary have taken us on a weekly telling of God’s story through the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament, beginning in Genesis at the Garden of Eden and concluding last week with Ezra and the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem.

This morning, God’s story continues in the New Testament through a master storyteller and historian named Loukas, who we know as Luke, the writer of the Third Gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke is the first Evangelist to present the gospel of Jesus Christ as a two-part story of salvation, beginning with the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic expectation and concluding with the story of the expansion of Jesus’ gospel through the Holy Spirit working in the apostles Peter and Paul.

This morning on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, we read from the opening passage of Luke’s birth accounts of John and Jesus in parallel succession.

Both are announced by the messenger angel Gabriel; both births are miraculous, both sets of parents receive the angelic proclamation in the face of besetting human circumstances and are bewildered by it; the names and divine destinies of both sons are announced; both sets of parents question

how such things can happen; both are assured of God's divine determination for their son's lives; both are given signs; and both play no active role in the fulfillment of the annunciations except to trust and retire to their respective homes.

The two annunciations occur in isolation from each other, but they intersect with Mary's visit to Elizabeth when both acknowledge their own pregnancies by the agency of the Holy Spirit of God within each of them.

Luke's infancy narrative occupying the first two chapters reveals further shared in common details in these parallel birth stories.

The result of both births is great joy; both births evoke remarkable responses from third parties, both grow in strength and the purpose of God.

The balance in the annunciation narrative is not maintained in the birth and childhood stories of John and Jesus.

Once John's circumcision and naming are given, the narrative spotlight falls fully on Jesus.

This asymmetry or unbalance is not a mistake on Luke's part, nor is it intended to avert a possible rivalry between John and Jesus; instead it is necessitated by theological realities.

John is the preparer, the forerunner of the Son of God and Savior, his side of the equation, so to speak, cannot claim equal or similar weight to that of Jesus.

Jesus must become greater; John must become less.

The effect of the infancy narratives is to demonstrate that the births of John and Jesus flow out of Israel's salvation history, and the birth of Jesus marks the fulfillment of it.

Luke's infancy narrative reverberates with Old Testament echoes.

A child is born to an old couple,
 reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah.
The barrenness of Elizabeth reminds readers
 of the infertility of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel,
 and Hannah.
Mary's magnificent mirrors Hannah's song.
Luke's infancy narrative throbs with the
 theological pulse of Old Testament expectation.
The Hebrew scriptures leave the story of Israel
 unfinished, pending a resolution of its
 outstanding problems in the Roman world
 in which they are held captive.
Luke's infancy narrative awakens long dormant
 expectations and hopes.
In other words, Israel's Advent of darkness is
 coming to a close with the birth of a savior,
 who is Christ the Lord.

Luke prefaces both his Gospel and Acts with
 an introduction addressed to a person named Theophilus.
He is the only evangelist who does so in his gospel story.
Unlike the other three Evangelists,
 Luke began not with the gospel but
 with a description of the interpretive task before him.
He declares from the outset of his prologue:
 "Many have undertaken to set down an orderly
 account of the events that have been fulfilled among us."
Luke's gospel is not a pioneer or novel effort,
 but dependent on "many" who have gone before him.
In other words, Luke is a historian, dependent upon
 authoritative primary sources.
He is indebted to "eye witnesses and servants of the word."
He has organized oral and written material into
 cohesive and orderly account.
In this prologue (1:1-4) Luke testifies that his role as
 an Evangelist is to bear responsible testimony to what
 God has done in human history in the life
 of Jesus of Nazareth.

Like a good historian, Luke places his narrative

within the context of history.

For his introduction of John's birth, it is "in the time of Herod King of Judea; in terms of Jesus, it is "in the days of Caesar Augustus."

Where and when we are born, the place and time, are part of our identity, the details recorded on our passports and one day included in our obituaries.

When Luke chooses to begin his magnificent story, he does so not with Mary and Joseph, but with Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Luke is not giving us a history lesson of names and dates; he is also a storyteller, and what a story it is.

This elderly, and so-far infertile, couple will join Abraham and Sarah, and many other, in learning they will have a child.

Luke's recounting of the angel's revelation with the soon-to-be dumbstruck Zechariah brilliantly combines the conventional with the comic.

Herod is not the only person Luke introduces in chapter one- he includes Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah and his wife Elizabeth a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses.

Luke infers that this couple is connected with Israel's antiquity and memory.

With Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke takes us to Israel's part, God's story.

Luke insists to understand Jesus requires understanding Jewish history and texts.

He is telling gentile converts this history of Israel is now part of your history as well read, remembered, and rejoice.

The name Zechariah comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'remember' with a 'yah' at the end which stands for YAHWEH; so his name means "God Remembers"

Elizabeth's name likely derives from the Hebrew Eli, meaning "my God," the beginning of

Jesus cry from the cross.
The second part comes from sheva, which is an oath.
Thus, her name indicates that God keeps promises
That also means that God remembers.
An earlier Elisheba is the wife of Aaron, the
first Israelites priest.
Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth
were “both righteous before God and blameless
in their observance of the Lord’s commandments.”

Although righteous, Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless,
Luke makes clear that the infertility is not the result of sin.
When the Hebrew Scriptures mentioned righteous couples
suffering from infertility, a conception is not far behind.
We can also anticipate that one or both parents will
encounter a messenger-an angel, priests, or a prophet-
to predict the conception.
The setting for this anticipated annunciation is in the Temple.
Zachariah is an ordinary village priest.
There were far too many priests in Israel for all to serve
in the Temple, so there was a system for all
the priests to serve.
Zechariah was chosen by lot to serve, and he is assigned
to perform the afternoon incense offering.

Luke writes that “all of the people who gathered to worship
were praying outside during the hours of incense offering (1:10)
Prayer, a motif Luke repeats, begins here
Some perhaps were praying, as Zechariah and Elizabeth
had, for children; others for health or healing;
still other for the well-being of the people, a
for thanksgiving, or, perhaps, for Herod to
take a long vacation.
Maybe some were praying for a prophet to come and
break four centuries of prophetic silence; or for
the Messiah to bring about the kingdom of God.

As Zechariah performs his sacrifice, “An angel of
the Lord appears to him, standing at the right side
of the altar of incense” (1:11).

The altar symbolizes God's presence, and the right side is the all-important station of authority and exaltation.

The position of the messenger, like the position of Jesus standing at the right hand of God Almighty, invests the message with divine legitimacy.

The angelic appearance to Zechariah is strongly reminiscent of Gabriel's appearance to Daniel at the time of the evening sacrifice.

The first thing mentioned after the appearance of the angel is Zechariah's seizure by fear.

Even Zechariah's piety and righteousness is no shield from terror of standing in the presence of a divine messenger.

The same term describes Herod's reaction to the report of a newborn King of the Jew's and Matthew's gospel.

The only other time it appears in Luke's gospel is when the resurrected Jesus appears to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus.

Beloved people of God,
this sense of being shaken up is Advent good news.

Christmas should be more than putting up the tree and wrapping the presents.

It should give birth to something that shakes up the routine, something that gets us to see the world otherwise.

That shaking up is what it means to follow Jesus.

To love one's enemies is scary; to take up one's cross is terrifying.

Yet at the same time, Luke reminds us, there is a legacy that carries us forward and a promise that God will remember the covenant and bring about eternal justice.

Zechariah's doubt causes him to become speechless.

Upon John's birth and Zechariah's nod, Zechariah will break forth in singing.

His song quotes Isaiah, reminding Luke's readers of exile and return, promise and fulfillment, of ancient Israel and the

new kingdom to come.
He will connect the work of his son, John,
to the “forgiveness of sins” and he will
speak light to those who sit in darkness.
John will sit in the shadow of darkness,
awaiting his fate at the hands of Herod’s son.
Yet Zechariah’s song suggests that John
will do what he is called to do.
John, like his father, will continue in this
role of a prophet, a teller of truths.
The truth that he proclaims is the LORD
for whose way he prepares others and us.

AMEN