

Fourth Sunday in Advent – 2024
Micah 5:2-5a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-56

Gabriel was none too happy with Zechariah. Ole Zechariah was a priest and he was in the Temple offering the incense. Gabriel is an archangel. He is a messenger of the highest order. He came with good news. Elizabeth, who had been barren, was going to bear a son. This would be a remarkable birth. Elizabeth was ancient. This child would uniquely prepare the way for the Messianic King. Zechariah and Elizabeth were devout, humble, gracious – all the things that you and I aspire to be. They walked blamelessly in the commandments and statutes of the Lord (Luke 1:6). Zechariah won himself a rebuke from the Archangel. It sounds *kinda* innocent enough but Gabriel heard in Zechariah's question the hint of incredulity, like Gabriel's word needed to be corroborated by a greater authority. "And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years'" (Luke 1:18). At that, Gabriel brought down the hammer.

"And the angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time'" (Luke 1:19-20). Nine months; Zechariah had nine months to both rejoice over his wife's pregnancy and consider his latent doubt at Gabriel's good news. A pregnant old woman – now there's something you don't see every day. There've only been two, after all. Sarah and Elizabeth – that's a pretty exclusive sorority. Sarah chuckled to herself when she heard that she would become pregnant. "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Genesis 18:12). I once suggested to my wife that maybe she could refer to me as her lower case "lord." That didn't go over very well. Sarah and Abraham had Isaac, the child of promise. Isaac means laughter. Abraham had laughed at the news as well. Abraham was a hundred years old. Sarah was ninety. Zechariah described Elizabeth as "advanced in years." Advanced in years is a euphemism for old and wrinkly.

You know something is afoot when 90-year-old-women are getting pregnant. In Zechariah and Elizabeth, the OT and the NT were colliding. The time is what was fully pregnant. The time for God to send His Son had arrived. Elizabeth had John in her womb and the pregnant Virgin goes to visit her old and wrinkly cousin. The joy, the elation that swept over those two women is palpable in Luke's account. Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, Mary's greeting and the Holy Spirit comes upon her. Elizabeth knows – Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant, Mary is the new wineskin of salvation, Mary holds the Savior of the world in her womb. "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:42-45). The wonder that held those two women's hearts, the jubilation; Elizabeth is an echo of Sarah, the OT matriarch, and Mary is an echo of the Tabernacle, carrying around God Himself in her flesh. Christ's throne is her womb. Everyone and everything in this encounter is spoken of in relation to the Lord Jesus who is in Mary's womb, including the last prophet who leaps for joy.

Babies can have faith. Faith is a work of God in the human heart. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17). John leaped for joy at being in the presence of the Son of God. Babies can have faith. Our babies have faith. The word of Christ saturates this Divine Service. In this place, our joy at being in the Lord's presence is what drives our friendships, our acts of service, and our understanding of who we are. Who are we? We are children of God. Children who were born not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but born of God (John 1:12-13). Zechariah had to ponder his questioning spirit for nine months. A silent husband; not only is a wonderfully devout, previously barren, wrinkly old woman pregnant but she has a silent husband; it just keeps getting better for Elizabeth. At John's birth, Zechariah's tongue is finally released and he lets loose a canticle, the Benedictus, Latin for the first word of Zechariah's song.

There are four hymns in the Gospel According to Luke: The Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria in Excelsis, and the Nunc Dimittis. Each one is exquisite. Each one is familiar to your heart. The Benedictus is the one that you hear less frequently. Zechariah is called upon to confirm his son's name. Elizabeth had been very direct. He shall be called John. The family was puzzled because no one in their family is named John. So they question Zechariah and he asks for a writing tablet. He wrote: "His name is John" (Luke 1:63). Immediately, his mouth was opened, his tongue was loosed and out came the Benedictus. Hope, faith, joy, devotion, gratitude – all that emotion, all that awareness of God's goodness comes pouring out of Zechariah's heart. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69).

If I were to be struck mute for nine months every time some doubt regarding God's plan, God's purposes, came ushering out of my mouth I might not ever be able to speak. Imagine the growth of spirit that Zechariah experienced as he watched his beautifully wrinkly wife grow with child and he rehearsed Gabriel's promises. Elizabeth must've been delighted even as her body ached. Surely the two of them regularly held each other's eyes, amazement sweeping over their faces and they laughed. Do you take stock of God's blessings? In your life, do you rehearse all the goodness you have received from the hand of God? The world's Christmas celebrations, the cultural variety, are lacking in this regard. We have bumper stickers, slogans – Keep Christ in Christmas, Jesus is the Reason for the Season – but it's hard for me not to hear a more indicting remark, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Matthew 15:8). I agree with the Grinch, so much of our cultural Christmas is just noise, noise, noise. Better to be silent Zechariah than to be inundated with advertisers and entertainers attempting to make a buck on the birth of God's Son all the while ignoring His cross, ignoring His church.

The Benedictus ends with Zechariah speaking about the tender mercy of our God, who visits us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the ways of peace (Luke 1:78-79). On us, the saints of Christ the King, a light has shined. In mere days you will sing: "Light and life to all He brings, ris'n with healing in His wings." That marvelous line comes from the hymn, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Light comes from the cross. It is brutal but it is love of the highest order – sacrificial love, saving love. Crucifixion, the Savior giving His life for you, is the light that shines in the darkness. We are

drawn to Christ. We are drawn to His light and His love. The Holy Spirit came upon Zechariah as he unleashed the Benedictus. The Holy Spirit shines the Light of Christ on you, through God's Word, and the depth of our faith lifts our hearts as we encounter this world's darkness, this world's unbelief. Malachi wrote this: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2). The Lord Christ is our sun of righteousness. Crucified and risen, He is our eternal health. The glory of His light, His love is yours. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69).