

## **“Zechariah: Waiting”**

**Luke 1: 5-22**

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### **First Sunday in Advent**

Advent is a journey. A journey to meet Jesus. To be ready to encounter the Christ. As if for the first time.

The journey begins in quiet. “In the days of King Herod.” This reference to Herod is not just an historical date on the calendar. It is the context: Ominous. Fearful. Foreboding. With good reason. Herod can be brutal. Herod will be brutal. Herod narrowly defines the limits of what the people are permitted to do and think.

The days of Herod are a frozen place that covers up other ways of seeing the world. Permeating with a cold, dank chilling effect. That penetrates not just to the bone, but puts a haze in the mind. There is a terror that comes at the mention of Herod’s name. This terror lives in the heart of the people. It lives in the mind and heart of Zechariah.

It connects with our situation. Ethicist Walter Fluker says the situation of modern spirituality and ethics is like closing our eyes, then open them to discover we have been dropped in the middle of a multilane highway with traffic whizzing past on every side.

In the midst of all these other people in other vehicles moving very fast, we stand on the curb of a small island, immobilized with fear. We are alone. We feel frozen. In a situation where cars and people and worlds collide.

Zechariah is frozen too. He is afraid to move. Zechariah has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to serve for just a few minutes in the Holy of Holies. A place so drenched in the radiant glory of God you can only go in once on your lifetime. So powerful with joy, wonder, holiness, you could not bear any more. The Holy place.

But when he goes in, he is not ready. He is not present to the angel. Zechariah in his mind and heart is still in the middle of the highway with these huge semi-trailer trucks barreling past him on all 4 sides, and the logo emblazoned on the side of every truck says: “Herod’s Reality.” It is all he can perceive.

Zechariah is living where life is hard: frozen with fear. He does not believe he can do something new. He does not believe his wife can do something new. He does not believe God can do something new.

Zechariah is frozen, stuck in Herod's reality, with the traffic whizzing all around him. He's so fearful, he cannot even speak.

And yet ... the Spirit of God is not frozen. The Spirit of God is on the move. Remember, the word we translate "angel" means messenger.

You don't have to buy into the whole greeting card image of winged creatures to believe that God sends us messengers. A messenger: someone who, in the midst of the gloom of Herod's world, speaks of an alternate reality. From the hiddenness of God comes a new possibility. God reveals something of God's self, God's message to us.

The stranger in the shadows says: "Zechariah! I know what you've been thinking. I know what you've been praying. I know your deepest dream. And now your dream deferred will no longer be denied. The Living God has a promise for you: Hope is going to happen. The promise will become present. The covenant will be kept. You will have your dream.

To this great good news, Zechariah looks at the angel and says, "Dude, are you sure? Seriously, I've got more years on me than the average sequoia. My wife's odometer has turned over more than once." In Zechariah's response, we come to see what is going on. Zechariah takes God seriously, but not seriously enough. Zechariah is an outwardly religious man, but in his spirit, in his soul, he has grown cynical. Zechariah had a dream. He had been praying for it, but he is not ready for it.

He is in the Holy Place, but the Holy Place is not in him. He is supposed to be there to worship: to connect with God. But really, he is more of a tourist. In the Holy of Holies he's just wandering around, taking in the sights and the only thing he is wondering is wondering what's for dinner. Inside of his heart and mind is Herod's reality.

The messenger of God, Gabriel, who cannot abide cynicism, says to Zechariah: "My name is Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to speak good news to you. I have given you just one word to say. A name. A name that will help prepare the way for the one who will make all the world new. If you cannot share that one word of God's good news, then you've got nothing else worth saying!" And Zechariah is rendered speechless!

This story is important because Zechariah's story may just be our story. When you come into the sanctuary, do you really expect a message from the living God to come to you?

These stone walls are not God. Nevertheless, when we come in to this place it is a symbolic place. And God uses human symbols to speak of transcendent things. So when we enter the sanctuary anytime, ask the question: are you prepared for the numinous to encounter you? Are you prepared for the mystery to whisper to you? To challenge you? To give you a definitive word to utter definitively?

For history to change, God requires a people prepared.  
The moment will come, but will we be ready? You see,  
We can pray, but not listen.  
We can ask, but not expect.  
We can wish, but not hope.  
We can see, but not perceive.  
We can hunger, but not open our mouths.

Zechariah's story confronts us with the question: Does God fit into our scheme of things? What would it take for us to perceive God has a message for us?

John Calvin said that knowledge of God is far more than conceiving that God exists. God is known only where there is a knowledge infused with the love of God, and the desire to do God's will. A trust that God loves us, and is seeking to do us well. Yet, it is not enough for us to merely believe. We have to mobilize our will. We need to do something in response to God's love, to put ourselves on God's side. That is a knowledge that saves.

During the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, received a chilling telephone call in which the caller said they had had enough of his troublemaking, and that if he was not out of town within three days, they were going to shoot him and bomb his house. With him, his wife and his baby girl inside. Martin was terrified.

He prayed. He found himself calling on the words of his father, calling on, "something in that person your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.... And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself." He prayed. Prayed about what he was trying to do. Confessing how weak he was. Prayed that he was losing his courage. And he heard a voice that told him to stand up for righteousness and justice. To fight on, because he would be with him to the end. He would never be alone." (Fluker, p. 26).

Out of the Otherness, Martin became other. He was changed. The Otherness of God disfigures us, transforms us, and makes us new. It calls us to be ready to respond.

What happens after Zechariah had been left frozen? Waiting? Transformation takes time. His wife Elizabeth becomes pregnant. She carries baby full term. She delivers the baby. Then it is time to name the baby. The people all around Elizabeth say, "You must name the baby after his daddy, and his daddy's daddy, and his granddaddy's daddy." In the bible, a name is your destiny. Their fear is apparent in this limitation on destiny. "Let's name him the same as we have for generations. Let's not take one step off the curb, because the traffic is whizzing by. Let's play it safe." At their fervent urging to stay the course, we discover the extended family, the community is a system as frozen as Zechariah had been.

It is then, at that defining moment of destiny that Zechariah finally speaks up:

He says, "His name is John."

His name is newness.

His name is change.

His name is transformation.

His name is God's possibility is about to be born among us.

His name is John.

The radical alterity, the otherness of the other, the messenger angel calls us. Our response – in acts of courage, compassion, justice— shows to others, what it also shows to ourselves – that we who worship in this place of symbols, when we speak the definitive word most definitively, become symbols ourselves. Symbols of what God makes possible.

Zechariah's story is our story. If we choose it. When we choose it, Herod's world of threat is transformed into a world of hope. Courageous acts of defiance against systems of injustice – even a word of truth -- give new meaning to life.

So are we ready? Does hope fit in our scheme of things? Does God fit into our scheme of things? What if you got what you hoped for? God has good news for us --are we ready to hear it?

To the Zechariah of the church, after all that time frozen in the intersection, are you ready to stand up, step out, and speak up? If so, Say the word! And let all the world prepare for the transformation of the Lord that is at hand.

As that powerful hymn says:

*Our God -- heaven cannot hold Him,  
Nor earth sustain,  
Heaven and earth shall flee away,  
when he comes to reign.  
In the bleak midwinter.*

In the frozen places, among the frozen people: a new world is coming, in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sources:

Daniel L. Migliore. *Faith Seeking Understanding* - Eerdmans Press.

Walter Earl Fluker. *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility and Community* - Fortress Press.