

“An Old Man’s Song of Thanksgiving”

December 11, 2016

The First Christmas Songs series

Join me if you know this song:

Have yourself a merry little Christmas

Let your heart be light

From now on, our troubles will be out of sight

Have yourself a merry little Christmas

Make the Yuletide gay

From now on, our troubles will be miles away...

I remember this song from my Muppets and John Denver Christmas album. I listened to it a lot as a kid. It was Rolfe the Dog who sang it. Still when I hear these words, I imagine sitting under a blanket cozy and warm looking at a Christmas tree with lights and ornaments that have special meaning for me. And there’s a sense that I could cut myself off from the troubles of the world and sit in my own little world.

But then I come back to reality. Whether it’s family stuff, lots of work, a long to-do list, grief, thinking about my friend who is in a tough situation, or watching the news of the day and realizing the troubles of the world, a “merry little Christmas” isn’t possible, nor is it realistic. There might be moments of calm and peace, some time to sit and reflect, but the point of Christmas - or at least the meaning of Christmas - isn’t to take us away from reality. Christmas is a celebration of God coming to be with us in our reality and in all of our humanity - the good, the bad, and the ugly - and all of us have it, don’t we? Sometimes it’s us, and sometimes it’s others, but it’s ours.

Zechariah had dealt with joy and struggle, but we don’t always hear too much about him. We usually jump right to Luke chapter 2 when we want to hear the Christmas story, and we’ll get there, but first we need to know about Zechariah because that’s where Gospel writer Luke begins.

Life wasn’t great for Zechariah or anyone else. Remember that he’s living under Roman occupation. King Herod, who was power hungry and constantly threatened by anyone who so much as looked like they might want control, had built a beautiful palace for himself and wanted to make his name great with more real estate. Of course, that was paid for by people and their taxes. And even more, Jews were persecuted under Roman rule.

Zechariah serves as a priest. We’re told that both he and Elizabeth are descendants of Aaron - remember Moses’ brother, who was a priest. We’re also told that they are deeply faithful, that Elizabeth is barren (unable to bear children), and that both of them are old. Right away we know there is joy and struggle in their lives.

William Barclay says that with so many descendants of Aaron, there were a lot of priests. They all served during festivals like Passover or Pentecost when Jerusalem was full of people, but otherwise, each priest probably only served a couple of weeks total in a year.

Even then, their duties were determined by drawing lots, so there was no guarantee that a priest would ever be called on to burn incense in order to prepare the Temple for sacrifices to be made. So Zechariah was most likely very excited that his lot was drawn to burn the incense. This was a part of making the offering smell sweet, delightful, and pleasing to God.

It's when Zechariah is in the Temple serving God that an angel of the Lord appears and tells him that he and Elizabeth will have a son and that he is to name him John. Zechariah's prayer has been answered, and John will be a prophet like Elijah who will prepare people for the Lord's coming. Can you imagine? It's a lot to take in even if he is faithful and even if he has prayed and even if he and Elizabeth have asked "why?" so many times.

Zechariah is unable to speak after his encounter with the angel, so he lives for months without being able to talk about his experience, though I bet he might have written something. I can only imagine his silent excitement at God's work in his life.

Just like other faithful Jews, Zechariah and Elizabeth had been waiting and hoping - and waiting and hoping - for a Savior to come. They have been waiting and praying for a child. We wait - for a job, a solution, a cure, a resolution, for healing. And waiting is hard. It's draining, and I can only imagine how these two felt after waiting so long. Their faith real and mature. They believed that God was in it with them for the long haul.

So after all this waiting, John is born, and there's some surprise because no one in the family is named John. Why John? It's when Zechariah writes the name "John" that he's able to speak and then begins to praise God out loud for the first time.

We're told that everyone is in awe. Everyone is talking about it. It's amazing, and they ask "What will this child turn out to be, for the hand of the Lord is with him?"

Remember when Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary came to meet her? Remember how we considered her a prophet for calling out Jesus as Lord? Well, Zechariah is inspired and sings a prophesy, which is what we read today. He recognizes that his waiting is over and having hope is a blessing because God is doing something in John and in Jesus. John will be the one to prepare the way, and Jesus is Messiah.

Zechariah's song sounds a little like Mary's song. He sings about God keeping the covenant - a promise to Israel - to show mercy and bring salvation. It's fulfilled here and now in Jesus. God is faithful to God's promises! Luke's Gospel uses the phrase "praising God" more than the rest of the New Testament put together. And Zechariah's praise is

real because his hope is realized. He and Elizabeth are a part of what God is doing to bring salvation and redemption.

And then Zechariah offers a beautiful vision for who John will become, and he speaks directly to John. You will be the one to prepare people. You will make Jesus known to them. You will remind them of God's forgiveness and help them to live in truth. And then Zechariah sings, *"because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

What a vision for this child - that he will help to guide people into the path of peace! The Hebrew word *shalom* doesn't mean that we're free from trouble, but rather that we're seeking the highest good in our relationship with God, others, and all of God's creation.

It's interesting that Zechariah lifts up that God is working through these two infants - one just born and one who will be born. As with so much of the Christmas story, this isn't the way that people thought God would work - or at least not lifting up that a child would have anything to do with salvation. And yet we begin our faith journey early, and I assume that Zechariah and Elizabeth taught John everything he knew so that he could fulfill his ministry as a prophet.

So I've thought about how we think about young people as a vital part of God's work in the world to bring healing and hope. And I know you and I have heard - and maybe we've used the phrase - "kids and youth are the future of the church." And while I get the idea, I hope that we can change our wording.

Kids and youth are the present church - just like adults. The story of Jesus' coming and his birth challenge us to consider how we treat those who are younger - even the youngest - as a vital part of the Body of Christ. They are just as important as you and me. We share in ministry with them, and it's incredibly important that we claim that part of who we are.

And beyond the reality that God chooses to come down to earth as a child, we also know that Jesus was clear about the place of children in his Kingdom. "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them..."

I remember commenting to one mom on how much I admired her teenage daughter - her kindness, her abilities, her intelligence. And this mom told me that she was grateful that God called her to be mom to this child. I never forgot that - a reminder that God's love is even deeper and wider and longer than ours even for our own children or all the children we love and care about.

When we celebrate baptism, we make promises to nurture them in faith. We promise to pray - and yes, this is a blatant reminder to put your name down as a prayer partner today. We promise to support them and their families by offering Christian Education, Youth Group, mission trip, confirmation, and other ministries that connect.

We promise to be a part of their lives, talk to them, and make sure they know that we care.

The question that people asked when Zechariah was praising God is important for us: "What will this child turn out to be?" And I hope we hear the call to be those who show the love of Jesus for all children whether we see them here or not. I hope we sense the urgency to share our faith through words and actions.

In the midst of our world, what do we hope for children and young people? I don't think that their dreams are much different than ours. They want peace, safety, security, and hope. They want to have purpose and possibility. They want to learn and grow. How will we encourage them as parents, grandparents, church friends, teachers, neighbors, and kind strangers? I say "kind strangers" because I know I've been impatient and judgmental to people I don't know and kids I don't know. I've given "the look" even if I haven't said anything.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were a part of God bringing hope - not just to them, but to the whole world. God was bringing light where they had felt like there was deep darkness. God was bringing life where there had been nothing for so long. Zechariah had great hope in John and Jesus because of what God was doing. And still today we hope in God's promises and find strength in God's possibilities. We praise God for God's salvation and look for the hope. It's there in those who are older and in those who are the youngest. We have to look for it and call it out - and give thanks for it.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.