

Christmas Eve Homily  
12/24/2013  
Offered by Pat Hoffman

I expect all of you have witnessed multiple Christmas pageants over the years. But I would like a show of hands of how many of those pageants included Zechariah?

This Advent, as I spent time with Luke's first two chapters, I was struck by how big a chunk was devoted to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. 43 verses of Chap. 1. The question I explored was why did the writer devote so much space to Zechariah?

Mark's gospel was written earlier than Luke's, as were Paul's letters. None of them mentions an extraordinary birth. Matthew's Gospel has an extraordinary birth story, but it is almost entirely different than Luke's. So, we're not dealing with historical record here. What is the writer of Luke communicating in the birth story?

So as a writer, I asked myself, what was Luke's purpose in including the Zechariah story and why begin with it? I'm going to offer you my take on that question. The birth story is an introduction to Luke's gospel, which includes numerous stories of Jesus' challenging the religious authorities over ways they had corrupted the worship of Yahweh by their accommodations with the Roman empire, and their rigid their practices that worked to exclude the poor, the ill, and the marginalized.

You all can call up stories from Jesus' life that illustrate what I'm talking about, such as his overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple; numerous examples of

Jesus' radical inclusivity, e.g eating with sinners, speaking to and asking for water from a woman, a Samaritan. And he publicly broke rules such as healing on the Sabbath in order to demonstrate the greater importance of compassion.

So what in the Zechariah story prepares the reader for Luke's Good News? I believe it tells us that many of the Temple practices that this good and worthy priest faithfully carried out were barren. While he is in God's sanctuary offering incense, which carried his and the prayers of the people up to God, that those prayers are heard. An angel of God appears, standing to the right of the altar of incense and announces to Zechariah that God has heard their prayers and is sending new life, bringing an end to their barrenness.

The angel tells him that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son and they will call him John. John will "make ready a people prepared for God." But Zechariah doubts the message of the angel saying, "I'm too old and my wife also is along in years." So, a miffed angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that because of his lack of trust he will be mute until it has all come to pass.

The story picks up again when Elizabeth gives birth and on the eighth day all the friends and relatives come for the bris, the service of circumcision and the official naming of the baby. Everyone expects this older couple to name their son Zechariah, after the father, but Elizabeth tells them his name will be John. But what does this woman know? They ask Zechariah and bring him something to write on. He writes that the child will be named John. In that moment of faithfulness, Zechariah finds his voice again.

I think this detail is pointing toward a new life, a new religious order that Yahweh is sending and it requires a new

name. Now that Zechariah is able to speak again, his first words are in praise of God in the beautiful Benedictus canticle, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” This ends Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 begins the very familiar, deeply loved part of Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth.

I’m glad to lift up the Zechariah portion today because I believe it is important for its relevance to our current experience in the church. Across the denominations we have witnessed a certain barrenness: sharp declines in membership, especially of young people; big drops in giving accompanied by laying off of denominational staff and closing of some churches, endless debates over issues of personal morality that have sapped our energy for larger calls for peace and justice. But there are signs of new life that we may recognize.

In the Luke birth story we are not surprised to see the poor, symbolized by the shepherds, rush toward Bethlehem to greet the new Messiah. Nor are we surprised that the marginalized, represented by the women, Elizabeth, Mary, and the widowed prophetess Anna, all can recognize who Jesus is and rejoice in his coming. We also have Simeon, an older religious man who is devout and just, whose life of faith has prepared him to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. And the good priest Zechariah, who had to be silenced for nine months, but was able to witness new birth and name it.

When we can have the mind of the just, of the marginalized, of the poor who are suffering, we too may recognize God’s places of inbreaking, of Christ’s rebirth, offering redemption for all the people, and we can rejoice.