

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Luke 1:8-20
Midwives of Hope: Zechariah
November 30, 2008
First Sunday of Advent

Today marks the first Sunday of Advent, and so, once again, we are going to be speaking a great deal on childbirth. When the time came for Amy to deliver our children, I guess you could say we followed the conventional and traditional path. We went to the hospital where Amy was admitted, nurses worked with her preparing her for what would be several hours of labor, and her doctor handled the actual delivery itself. Well, I guess Amy played a role in this too!

This, of course, is not the traditional way much of the rest of the world experiences childbirth. The role of obstetrics is a specialty of medicine that is only a few centuries old. Before there were hospitals and physicians who delivered babies, there were midwives. It is assumed, that due to the importance midwifery, that it has been around as long as human civilization.

Historically, some midwives were just family members. Others were actually trained on some level. According to the World Health Organization, in many areas of the world today, midwives are the only available providers for childbearing women. Ready or not, the labor and birth are going to happen, so a midwife helps provide care to expecting mothers and offers assistance during delivery.

During this season of Advent, our theme will be: Midwives of Hope. Through the gospels we will look at how certain people, places and times served a role in delivering God's hope into this world.

Today, we will consider the man Zechariah. I know you are thinking that a man cannot be a midwife, but you would be wrong – both professionally and metaphorically. In fact, in the 1700's, obstetricians were called male midwives.

This story of Zechariah in the Temple, is only told by Luke. It is how Luke chooses to introduce the narrative of the beginnings of Jesus. *Zechariah*, whose name means "God has remembered," foreshadows what is to come. We are told that he and his wife Elizabeth were righteous and blameless before God, but were childless.

In those days, infertility was a source of shame and inferiority. I hasten to add that even today many who desire children, but cannot have them, expressed much the same feelings of shame and incompleteness. Barrenness is part of the larger story here, and we will come back to this in a moment.

Zechariah was serving as priest at the temple. Priests across the land were divided into 24 groups and each group would serve in the Temple twice a year for a week at a time. Some scholar has estimated that there were about 20,000 priests during this time. A list was compiled of the priests who had never served in the inner sanctuary, where the offering was made and the ashes would be cleaned off. Essentially, a lottery would take place to determine who would go into the inner sanctuary. To serve, was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Indeed, many priests would never be chosen to go in.

Zechariah was chosen. For any priest this would be the highlight of their life, and so, we can imagine that Zechariah entered filled with the joy of being chosen. This would be something he would tell others about the rest of his life. Yet, as he entered the holy inner sanctuary, he was not just entering with his joy. He carried his burden. He and Elizabeth had no child, which implied no future. Recall, that in this story, Zechariah was praying, but, what for what was he praying? A child? Surely, not at his age. What then? I guess we cannot

know, but then again, some prayers are so deep, so intimate, that there are no real words that are sufficient. We all have prayers that come out of our deepest longing, but for fear or lack of understanding, we remain mute.

While all of this is taking place in the inner sanctuary, all the people wait outside for him. Zechariah is to emerge and pronounce the blessing. The people wait and they wait and they wait. Zechariah is taking an unusually long time.

You have heard the story. The angel Gabriel, one of the seven archangels, according to Jewish custom, announces the good news that Zechariah's prayers have been heard; Elizabeth will have a child, a son. The angel instructs that the promised child is to be named "John," whose name means "YHWH is gracious." In verse 15, the angel says that John will be "filled with the Holy Spirit." We will come to know him as John the Baptizer.

It was the belief that there had been no prophet since the time of Malachi, and so John's promise of being filled with the Holy Spirit, was an indication that the Messianic age was dawning. I guess, however, I am getting ahead of the story.

Zechariah's response is a direct quote of Abraham from Genesis 15:8 – "*O Lord GOD, how am I to know...*" an allusion to Abraham, who like Zechariah and Elizabeth, was well along in years, before he and Sarah gave birth to their firstborn.

Gabriel's role was to bring the good news (vs. 19) but Zechariah could not receive it. Therefore, he would not share it until John's birth. Zechariah's next words come at vs. 68: "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...*" Right now, however, he is rendered silent.

Zechariah is silent in more ways than one. Nobody much preaches about him. This story is not listed as a lectionary reading. I perused my books of sermons and could not find one sermon on this story. Elizabeth, his wife, we know more about. Their son, John the Baptizer, we know about. Of course, Mary, Joseph, shepherds and Wise Men, all get their time behind the pulpit. Why do we just pass over Zechariah? Is it because his response to the good news embarrasses us? "How will I know?"

In truth, I ask it all the time. *How will I know* this "good news," when markets are down and politics are dividing and bills are piling up? *How will I know* when the doctor calls us at home and wants us to come in for another consultation? *How will I know* when the children won't come home for a visit, when we feel neglected, when we are not sure if we will have a job in 2009? *How will I know* good news in this bad news world?

There may not be many sermons on Zechariah during Advent, but there ought to be. I find myself standing more often than not, with good old Zachariah, in the midst of holy things and holy places and holy language, only to profane it all with my doubts and disbelief. "*How will I know?*" Indeed, can anyone know?

And so, the first recorded miracle in the gospel of Luke, is not changing water into wine, as it is with John, and not the cleansing of a man possessed of an evil spirit, as with Mark, and not the virginal conception of Mary, as we read in Matthew. No. The first miracle we read of in Luke, is that Zechariah is silenced and rendered mute.

Maybe Zechariah is a picture of many of the people surrounding the birth event of Jesus. Chuck Bugg published a book of sermons twenty years ago, and in one of them he wrote of all the people who did not see the Good News, even though it was right there in front. Caesar Augustus, the poor old innkeeper, the crowds making their way through Bethlehem – none of them saw or knew the Good News being born that day. Zechariah asks "How will I know?"

You may be asking, I thought you said Zechariah was a midwife of hope. Here it appears he has proven himself unfit to deliver the news, let alone receive it.

Here is what I see. Zechariah's skepticism, doubt, fear, disbelief or whatever we may accuse Zechariah of, does not negate God's good news. People, attitudes, politics, power brokers, sinners and saints, have no dominion over God's own design for the beloved. God will be God, with or without us, and Good News is good, even if we are not ready to hear it.

Maybe Zechariah is a reminder to all of us who ask, "How will I know?" that it is not about us that God's future is God's future, and not ours to manage. When we find that we just cannot believe, we are drawn or invited to behold.

A midwife, it is said, does not interfere in the delivery, but simply assists in the birthing. An OB/GYN in this church wrote to me and said, "Labor must be one of the most vulnerable times for a woman. She is party to a process that she did not start, cannot control, and cannot stop. She is not allowed to change her mind as labor has not asked her permission to begin." Zechariah, righteous and blameless but nonetheless disbelieving, is still used by God to *behold* the hope of God's people.

Every week, we do the same thing: we gather as a church, we pray, we ask, we worship, and we go home. Every week it is the same. We are not so different from Zechariah. We not only enter this holy place, but this holy season, with our burdens and baggage. We enter, mumbling our prayers and just wanting to get through this time, this season, and this faith.

Maybe, there in the temple, it isn't so much that Zechariah is faithless. Zihna and I have discussed this text, and she suggests, that perhaps he is overwhelmed with the announcement and vision.

Are we not also at places of silence, because we are overwhelmed? Our disbelief mutes us; our wonder and amazement mute us; our ambiguity mutes us? But silenced or not, it gives us the occasion to remember that we do not have to manage anything for this good news of God, but receive it and live it. It is not by our words, our ingenuity and not by our trickery or manipulation. Rather, all we are asked to do is receive it.

Here is the thing about Advent and Christmas: It seems as though everyone is attempting to tell us how to feel and how to respond, and what we are supposed to do during this season. We preachers are not much different. We are to feel joyful; we are to feel happy; we are to feel expectant. But, maybe like Zechariah, we need to be silent or silenced before the messenger of God, and step back at the wonder of it all.

Maybe the silence is a gift. We are not hurting, after all, for people to invoke God's name all around us, but I fear, it is most often used to defend or support one's own agenda, rather than God's. We hear God's name along the campaign trail, and we hear God's name to defend our prejudices, and we hear God's name to support our agendas. Silence could be the gift.

Perhaps, Gabriel should make another visit and say, "hush up," and see what God is doing for us, and with us, and in spite of us and because of us.

When Zechariah found his voice, he gave the words of blessing of what God is doing. We, the church are called in all of the beholding, to find our voice and announce that God has come to put an end to our bad news, an end to our captivity, an end to our violence, and end to our manipulations, a voice of the Good News.

We crowd alongside Zechariah, doing much the same silenced by our preconceived notions and fledgling beliefs and nagging doubts, beholding the good news of the one who has come to bring good news to the poor, let the oppressed go free, sight to the blind, and release to the captives.