

“Hope”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
December 1st, 2013
1st Sun. in Advent
AIDS Remembrance Sunday

Romans 15:7-13

Luke 1:67-80

[Zechariah said,]

“[76] And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High...

[79] to give light to those who sit in darkness

and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Let us pray... O God,

As we look forward to ‘getting into the Christmas Spirit’,

help us remember that you are always near and at hand.

As we practice being aware of your presence,

may we grow in hope and thanksgiving.

Amen

Usually at this time of year – early in the season of Advent,

we hear the story of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel

came to speak to Mary about the birth of Jesus Christ the Messiah.

Today, I’d like to talk about the birth of John the Baptist –

and especially, the role played by his father Zachariah.

[Luke 1:5-11, 21-25, 57-66[67-80]; 3:1-6]

In the days when Herod the Great was king of Judea,

Zachariah was a priest who served in the Temple of Jerusalem.

He was married to Elizabeth, and both were faithful
in practicing their faith.

Now, they had no children, and – considering that they both were older,
they were unlikely to ever have a child.

One day, it was Zachariah’s turn to stand his watch time of prayer
where he would enter the Temple’s Holy of Holies to burn incense,
while a multitude of Jewish people waited outside for him.

Just as the time approached for the incense to be burned,
an angel appeared beside the altar.

What happened next was a personal revelation – a vision

in which the Angel Gabriel tells Zachariah that his wife Elizabeth & he
will be having a baby and they are to name him, “John”.

Willard, p.2

Compared with Mary – who responds to her baby news by asking
how this will take place given her circumstances,
there seems to be a distinction when Zachariah just wants to know
how he will know.

It was apparently the wrong question, because he seems to be punished for it –
or maybe in a humorous way of thinking,
the angel really answered his question,
because now the way he would know would be when he could speak again.

As Zachariah made his way out of the Temple,
the people – who had been waiting for him, were amazed and perplexed
when he could not speak, but they realized something happened ...

It was soon after this that Elizabeth knew she was pregnant,
and expressed gratitude to God for remembering her,
taking away her embarrassment for being childless.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth,
she had a son and all the neighbors and family rejoiced with her,
celebrating God's generous mercy.

On the 8th day after the baby's birth,
they all came over to circumcise the child.

Now, they were not necessarily the same people who were at the Temple
nine months before, because Zachariah & Elizabeth
lived in the hill country of Judea outside of Jerusalem.

As family & friends, though, they expressed their opinion
that the baby should be named Zachariah after his father.

But Elizabeth his mother said, "No, his name is John",
and the relatives and neighbors objected to this,
making it clear how they felt when they said,
"No one in your family was ever named John before."

They wouldn't let the matter rest, so they went to see what Zachariah
wanted to name his baby.

He asked for a writing tablet and he wrote,
"His name is John" – and right then, Zachariah could speak again
and he praised God!

All these other people on the other hand, were terrified.

Willard, p.3

Not only does Zachariah speak, but he sings and his song has entered Church liturgical tradition as the Benedictus – which means ‘blessing’.

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Benedictus>

The first part of Zachariah’s song is a doxology of praise to God and an acknowledges the Messianic hope for deliverance from enemies, as if by the help of a warrior-hero of olden times, The hoped for promise of deliverance also had the goal of being able to ‘serve [God] without fear’ for Roman occupation and oppression was a present reality for the Judeans.

[68] "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people,
[69] and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
[70] as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
[71] that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us;
[72] to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,
[73] the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,
[74] to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
[75] in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.

This is followed by a blessing that is addressed to the child himself, though no mention is made about ‘baptism’.

[76] And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
[77] to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
[78] through the tender mercy of our God,
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high
[79] to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

In this part of the song, Zachariah affirms that this little boy will have a great mission described as bringing light into places of ignorance and fear – much like what we hope for in our own time, with the goal of being guided ‘into the way of peace’.

Willard, p.4

Just as Elizabeth's hope for a baby to end her childless condition was realized,
so has the hope for freedom of the people of Israel been remembered
with the birth of this child.

Zachariah's name literally means 'God remembered'

http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Zachariah&allowed_in_frame=0

In our lesson from Romans 15:7-13,
there are four references to the Hebrew Scriptures
which praise God and express hope for salvation
of the Jewish community with the help of God:

"I will tell the nations about you, and I will sing praises to your name"
from Psalm 18:49,

"Come and celebrate with God's people"
from Deuteronomy 32:43,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles. All you nations, come and worship him."
from Psalm 117:1, and

"Someone from David's family will come to power.
He will rule the nations, and they will put their hope in him"
from Isaiah 11:10.

These words are woven together with the words of the Apostle Paul
to show a vision of God's unfolding plan that went beyond
John the Baptist's mission of calling the Jewish community
into repentance of sins and be baptized.

John prepared the way for Jesus' words to be heard & his deeds to be recognized;
Paul and others, then, would take this message of hope out into all the world.
This is the shape that Christianity would take as a world religion
with a universal focus, embracing all humankind
with a message of hope for salvation.

We must understand this vision of hope as being more than individual salvation,
more than a personal relationship with God –
though this will always be the building block
for the salvation of humanity that includes social transformation.

We must not limit that hope, but recognize God's handiwork
in historical as well as personal events.

In your wildest dreams,
would you have imagined that the Soviet Union would crumble
in the way that it did on November 9th, 1989 –
virtually ending more than 40 years of a nuclear standoff?

Willard, p.5

Just as the Berlin Wall fell down as an undeniable end to the Cold War,
we must hold out for hope that a true peace in Afghanistan and Pakistan
can be achieved and that Islamic extremism can be transformed.

This is AIDS Remembrance Day today when we recall the tragic loss
of the lives of so many to AIDS and how we must hold out with hope
for the possibility of a cure, and give thanks for treatments
that have been discovered, allowing people to live with HIV/AIDS.

We must look to the challenges in our own lives –
You must see the hope of salvation in terms of whatever burden you bear,
and hold on for the hope anticipated by the Jewish prophets of old
that still has meaning for us today.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ –
John prepared ‘the way of the Lord’
by recalling the promises of God to the Jewish people.
Jesus actively brought the fulfillment of those promises to life,
and his disciples, together with the Apostle Paul, would bring –
not only a message, but the practical application of that salvation
beyond the Jewish community to *all people everywhere* for all *time*.

There is a Native American parable
that tells about how music came into the world.
In the time long, long before – when there were no songs on the earth,
there was a legend among the birds
that music existed in the highest reaches of the sky, beyond the clouds,
and if one of them could rise above the clouds,
they could bring music to the Earth.
Each of the birds tried in turn, but one after another, they failed.
The last to attempt this was the great Eagle.
yet unnoticed by anyone, the Bluebird hid herself
among the neck feathers of the Eagle.
Eagle soared straight up and with each powerful sweep of its wings,
he came closer to the highest regions of the sky.
Eagle rose above, passing beyond where the strongest birds had reached,
penetrating the clouds, yet even Eagle faltered and his strength failed him.
As Eagle fell back to Earth, Bluebird flew from the neck feathers of eagle,
and was able to go the rest of the way to reach above the clouds,
to hear the music and learn it.
Bluebird easily glided back to Earth and taught all the birds
to find their own voice and to sing their song.

Willard, p.6

We must be like the Eagle to help someone reach their potential
or be like Bluebird and share the song.

We must be like John the Baptist and prepare the way for Jesus
to still do his work of saving lives and transforming societies.

Whether we bring hope for a future to a dying friend,
or whether we help someone who is out of work to find job opportunities,
or whether we encourage just one child to read –
we are helping to create futures by inspiring hope.

By our music and prayers on Sunday morning,
we give expression to the *hope* promised to us from the past,
that we proclaim as a *future hope* that is attainable.

In the words of the Apostle Paul that still ring true for us today:

I pray that God, who gives hope,

will bless you with complete happiness and peace because of your faith.

And may the power of the Holy Spirit fill you with hope.’ Rom. 15:17

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today from Romans 15:7-13
speaks of how all people are welcome to God
and that people ought to accept each other, too.*

*In the midst of these encounters,
we are reminded that God brings hope for overcoming divisions...*

7 Honor God by accepting each other,
as Christ has accepted you.

8 I tell you that Christ came as a servant of the Jews
to show that God has kept the promises he made to their famous ancestors.
Christ also came, 9 so that the Gentiles would praise God for being kind to them.

It is just as the Scriptures say,

“I will tell the nations about you, and I will sing praises to your name.”

10 The Scriptures also say to the Gentiles,

“Come and celebrate with God’s people.”

11 Again the Scriptures say,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles. All you nations, come and worship him.”

12 Isaiah says,

“Someone from David’s family will come to power.

He will rule the nations, and they will put their hope in him.”

13 I pray that God, who gives hope,

will bless you with complete happiness and peace because of your faith.

And may the power of the Holy Spirit fill you with hope.

Luke 1:5-11, 21-25, 57-66; 3:1-6

[1:5] In the days of Herod, king of Judea,

there was a priest named Zechari'ah, of the division of Abi'jah;

and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

[6] And they were both righteous before God,

walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

[7] But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren,

and both were advanced in years.

[8] Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,

[9] according to the custom of the priesthood,

it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

[10] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

[11] And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord

standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

[21] And the people were waiting for Zechari'ah,

and they wondered at his delay in the temple.

[22] And when he came out, he could not speak to them,

and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple;

and he made signs to them and remained dumb.

[23] And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

[24] After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived,

and for five months she hid herself, saying,

[25] "Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me,

to take away my reproach among men."

[57] Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son.

[58] And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her,

and they rejoiced with her.

[59] And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child;

and they would have named him Zechari'ah after his father,

[60] but his mother said,

"Not so; he shall be called John."

[61] And they said to her,

"None of your kindred is called by this name."

[62] And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called.

[63] And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote,

"His name is John." And they all marveled.

[64] And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

[65] And fear came on all their neighbors.

And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea;

[66] and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying,

"What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

[3:1] In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiber'i-us Caesar,
Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee,
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturae'a and Trachoni'tis,
and Lysa'ni-as tetrarch of Abile'ne,
[2] in the high-priesthood of Annas and Ca'iaphas,
the word of God came to John the son of Zechari'ah in the wilderness;
[3] and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins.
[4] As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,
"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
[5] Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways shall be made smooth;
[6] and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Luke 1:67a-80

[67a] And his father Zechari'ah was filled with the Holy Spirit,
and prophesied, saying,

[68] "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has visited and redeemed his people,

[69] and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,

[70] as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

[71] that we should be saved from our enemies,

and from the hand of all who hate us;

[72] to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,

and to remember his holy covenant,

[73] the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,

[74] to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,

[75] in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.

[76] And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

[77] to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,

[78] through the tender mercy of our God,
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high

[79] to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace."

[80] And the child grew and became strong in spirit,

and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.