

December 9, 2018 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Luke 1:57–66

TITLE: What Will This Child Become?

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

For thousands of years, there was the story of the Hebrew people as recorded in the Old Testament—stories of creation, of Moses delivering people to freedom, of kings and prophets, women and men of faith awaiting the fulfillment of God’s promises through the sending of a Messiah. Then came a period of silence and the opening pages of a New Testament: stories of new beginnings, of a Messiah who fulfills God’s promises and shows the power of God’s love through resurrection and justice, and giving us hope for eternal life. We find ourselves now in the season of Advent, waiting for a few more weeks until we hear the Christmas story about the birth of this Messiah. But today we’re going to focus on the other Christmas story—one that precedes the story of Jesus’ birth by telling a bit about Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist.

We just read some verses from the end of that story, in which Elizabeth’s surprising, late-in-life pregnancy came to an end and she gave birth to a baby boy. Neighbors and cousins and the usual mixed-bag of relatives descended upon her house to celebrate. They were there to witness the ritual naming and circumcision of the child. They were also there to continue their speculations about the child’s future. Nine months earlier it had been Zechariah’s turn to burn incense in the Holy of Holies inside the Jerusalem temple. Being of a priestly family, twice a year that was his job—and he did it well. Then one day the angel Gabriel came to him inside the temple, letting him know that Elizabeth would finally give birth to a child. Zechariah found that news a bit hard to believe, so as a lesson for him and a sign for everyone else, he was struck dumb.

For nine months, Zechariah was relegated to the shadows, silently sipping his tea and communicating with mute smiles and shoulder shrugs, while everyone else was fixated on Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy and what this child’s future was going to be. When the baby arrived, the family members spoke up and said that the boy should be named Zechariah after his father. It was a fine name, meaning “God remembers.” But Elizabeth interrupted and said, “No, his name shall be John, which means “God has been gracious.” Soon everyone was squabbling, insisting that no one in their family had ever been named John, when they suddenly remembered silent Zechariah over in the corner. They gave him a tablet and some chalk and watched as he wrote down, “His name is John.”

If that was where this other Christmas story ended, we could smile at this tidy little drama—a silent husband, a healthy mother, a newborn baby carrying an angel-given name. All’s well. Be of good cheer and Merry Christmas. The End. But that’s not where the story ends. The naming of John is not the end, but the beginning of a whole lot of things that involved people back then and you and me today.

After nine months of silence, we're told that three things happened to Zechariah: his mouth was opened, his tongue was set free, and he began to speak, praising God. "Opening his mouth" meant he had the desire to engage once more in the community around him. He had tried to tell folks what had happened with the angel Gabriel that day he was struck dumb in the temple, but no one understood. Eventually he got tired of trying and kept his mouth closed—until this new day, when the desire to connect and communicate came back to him. Then his "tongue was set free." Zechariah not only had the desire to talk; he also had the capacity to talk. He could form words. He could potentially get everyone's attention, hold the floor, and speak what was on his mind. Third, the bible says he "began to speak". In addition to the desire and the capacity, he acted on them and began talking—praising God—letting loose with words and eventually an entire song celebrating how God had brought glad tidings of great joy for all people. Not just for him and Elizabeth, as new parents, but for all people.

The famous Christmas story—the one about Mary and Joseph and shepherds and wise men—is great and all, but its focus is on God breaking into our world with a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. With this other Christmas story, the focus is more on simple folks—like Elizabeth and Zechariah. And in a real way, it's on us too—people who have mouths that at times feel the desire to open up. People with tongues who have the capacity to speak for change and justice and hope. People who then use our words, as best we can, to point others to God's good news in Christ so that all creation can know, love, and rejoice in the Lord.

When Zechariah was confronted by the angel Gabriel, he asked for a sign to know that what the angel promised would actually come about. Well, Zechariah himself became the sign. He was struck dumb and only regained his speech when he obeyed the instructions of the Lord and named his newborn son John. Elizabeth likely wondered what this late-in-life pregnancy truly meant. So she went off in seclusion for five months or more, to think and reflect and pray. She too became a sign for her family and her community—literally, in that when she met up with her cousin Mary, they could compare notes about these angel visits and know that God's word was true and trustworthy.

What was true of them is true for us. We are the signs of what God is doing in the world now and what God hopes for the world that is to come. We are the mouths open at times in wonder or disbelief. We possess tongues to form words. We are called to break the silence, to speak words of comfort or challenge. Like Zechariah, we are to first praise God, our rock, our redeemer, our hope and sure confidence. Then we look at what is happening in the world around us and we respond with words of prophetic faith and public witness.

Consider these things: Why has Pittsburgh had 108 casualties already this year, with 74 of them being African Americans? Why does it seem like half the world is on a diet and the other half is literally starving? Why is half the world housed and

the other half is homeless? How is it possible for the American journalist Jamal Khashoggi to be slaughtered without ramifications against his Saudi murders? How is it possible for the world to allow thousands of children to die in Yemen from a manmade war of disruption and intentional starvation? In this affluent society where some reap windfalls from stock options, corporate profits and offshore bank accounts, why are so many people around us still unable to pay their bills, find affordable and effective medical care, and having to battle with loneliness, sadness, and despair?

Long ago a child was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. That's great! I'm sure that right this very minute a child is being born here in Pittsburgh. That's also great. No child on this earth was ever meant to be ordinary. No newborn was ever meant to be seen as second-rate, unworthy, or insignificant because every child is a reflection of God's care for this world today and hope for this world tomorrow. Do we believe that? Can we act as if that were true? It means letting our jaws drop, both in wonder when a newborn comes into the world and also in amazement or shock when we see how so many children are treated. It means recognizing that our tongues are truly free—that as Americans, as Pittsburghers, as women and men of faith, we have the capacity to speak up—to use our privilege, our education, status, or simply our stubbornness to break the silence so that real change happens. And following the example of Zechariah, we are to bring God into the conversation around us. We've been mute long enough. Now is the time to speak and praise and tell of a justice that will no longer be denied.

The language of Isaiah 40 is often assigned to John the Baptist. But in honesty, it has also been assigned to us—for we are John's godparents as well as his companions in the ongoing work of the Lord. Isaiah 40 says: *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. (Where are our wildernesses today?) Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Where are there crooked things around us that need to be made straight?) For every valley—valleys of despair and fear-mongering—shall be lifted up. And every mountain and hill—mountains of greed or war-stockpiles or injustice—will be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together.*

No child is meant to be ordinary. No child of God is destined to be overlooked or dismissed. Every newborn should evoke the same response from us as was evoked from that family gathering in the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, namely the question: What then will this child become? Let us start there. Thanks to this other Christmas story, we see clearly where we are to focus our energies. May we bear witness in our bodies, by our deeds and presence, just as Elizabeth did. May we bear witness by our words of praise and prophetic power, just as Zechariah did. And may we know that we are the sign we've been waiting for and to whom others are looking. Now is the acceptable hour. Now the glory of the Lord shall be revealed that all people may see it together. **Amen.**