

December 9, 2018 (Second Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Luke 1:18–24

TITLE: The Other Christmas Story – Part I

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Imagine that you're a religious seamstress or tailor. You hold poised in your hand a fine, sharp needle, ready with sturdy thread, and your task is to stitch together the two halves of the bible—the Old Testament with its stories of creation, Moses, and the prophets and the New Testament with its description of a new creation, Jesus Christ, and the world to come. We typically imagine that the seam between the Old and New Testament opens on the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus, because the babe born to Mary and Joseph was the Messiah, the fulfillment of numerous Old Testament prophecies. But Luke's gospel doesn't begin with that Christmas story. It begins with the other Christmas story—the one involving Zechariah and Elizabeth. Sure, there's some overlap between the two. Both contain announcements from the angel Gabriel and both focus on the pregnancy of two unusual women – one quite young, one significantly older. But in a real way, there is something about this other Christmas story that is intended for each of us and speaks an important message to us today.

As I said, imagine you're stitching together the Old and New Testaments. How do you make the move from the Hebrew scriptures to the gospel message of good news of great joy? Well, you use stories as your connective thread. You describe an older pious couple who reminds us of a different old, pious couple of ages past. Zechariah and Elizabeth are like Abraham and Sarah. Both are quite mature in age and both couples have struggled with infertility, remaining childless in a culture that sadly measured God's favor by the size of your family. Both Abraham and Zechariah are visited by an angel, who informs them that their wives will soon become pregnant and bear them a son. Both of the men express doubts—Abraham even goes so far as to laugh in the angel's face. And in a marvelous bit of symmetry, both men ask the angel the exact same question: *How will I know this is so?* (cf. Gen 15:8, Lk 1:18) What came next for Abraham was that a deep sleep and darkness descended upon him and he was told God had made a covenant with him and his descendants that will be a blessing for all people. For Zechariah, well, he had to wait a bit longer to get his answer—about nine months to be precise.

That's how Luke tailored a seam between the Hebrew scripture and his New Testament gospel. He paired the first couple in his gospel with the patriarch and matriarch of the Old Testament. Now comes the question for us: What does the seam look like that stitches together Zechariah's story with our story? Where are we in this other Christmas story? To answer that question, begin by looking around at where you are now. You're in a church sanctuary, seated in a pew, with hymnals and bulletins close at hand, similar perhaps to scores of other times you've come to church. This 11:00 on Sunday morning ritual is similar to the ritual Zechariah was observing in the temple long ago. He was a member of the group assigned to spend one week twice a year living near the temple and going alone into the Holy of Holies to burn incense and offer prayers for the people. Just like you're likely not expecting anything dramatic to happen this morning, I'll bet

that Zechariah didn't expect anything unusual to happen on that day when it was his turn to burn incense in the temple—but it did!

Point 1: Church worship and church rituals are where God's spirit often moves. Communion, baptism, shared prayer, lit candles and sung hymns—it may seem mundane and at times not very exciting. It certainly doesn't have the bells and whistles of Smartphone social media or breaking stories on Twitter feeds. But it is the place where God commonly speaks. Not the only place, but it is here that the seams come together to make a tapestry of faith, of new life, forgiveness, and of justice. The preacher Otis Moss III has pointed out that approximately three hundred slave insurrections have been recorded in history, and only three of them did not originate in church. Being in God's house puts you in the right place to be sent by God to do God's work out in the world.

Next point: Zechariah had trouble believing what the angel told him. How many times have you also spoken words of doubt—when you've either told someone face to face or said in a prayer to the heavens, "How can I know this is true?" Here's where Zechariah and Elizabeth's story is very helpful, because the answer to that question is rarely an immediate one. When Zechariah came out of the temple, he couldn't offer the typical words of blessing to the gathered crowd. In fact, he couldn't say anything. He had to wait in silence. And when Elizabeth became pregnant, she too was unsure of what this all meant, so she went into seclusion and quietly waited to see what the future held for her and her baby.

The timing of God's answer to our prayers is often part of the answer. Maybe an answer, an epiphany or spiritual insight comes right away. If that happens, as they say in New Jersey, good for you! But most times the answer comes later—when we're finally ready to hear it and take the answer to heart. In Dickens' Christmas Carol, Scrooge didn't gain his fresh appreciation of Christmas instantly. It took a series of visions, three separate visits by Christmas ghosts, and a fair amount of soul-searching on his part for him to get to that wonderful moment when he ran to window and was able to truly wish the world a Merry, Merry Christmas. It seems that Zechariah needed about nine months to understand the wonderful new things God was doing in the world, which nicely coincided with the length of his wife's miraculous pregnancy. In this season of Advent, which is all about waiting and expectancy, know that God's timing is part of the answer and therefore both are to be trusted.

Last point: Zechariah himself was part of the sign he was seeking from the angel. When he asked, "How will I know?" his period of muteness was part of the answer. Zechariah became part of the angel's message, just as Elizabeth did as well. They were individual stitches in the larger tapestry of faith—one that bound together the Old and New Testaments and sews together their world to our world today. That's the way God works—with us, through us, in spite of us.

After the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre made this comment: *Humanity has now gained the power to wipe itself out, and must decide every single day that it wants to live.* Each day we choose to live—each

day we choose to believe—each day we choose to be a sign pointing toward what we hope and pray will come to pass.

So how can we be a sign of faith amid all the conversations happening around us here in Pittsburgh. Amazon didn't bring its headquarters here, but we need to talk about what we still want for our city. The shooting at the Tree of Life—the shooting of Antwon Rose—the fact that there have been 108 homicides in Pittsburgh so far this year, with African Americans being 74 of them: How should we respond and change that statistic? The flood of national news washing over us: the manmade tragedy of Yemen, with children dying of intentional malnutrition; the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi with no political repercussions; the unfolding saga of Robert Mueller's investigation and web of lies plus obstruction of justice that have been spun from the highest offices in our land; the people around us, battling with depression, with cancer, with bills stacked up and savings spiraling down. Here we are, like Zechariah of old, attending church, saying our prayers, holding onto hope and wondering how we will know what it looks like whenever God's answer finally arrives.

Well, like Zechariah of old, we are the sign we've been waiting for. We are the ones who are to go out into the streets and truly notice who is around us—asking others “How are you really? What are your hopes?” We invite people to tell us what's on their hearts, what's troubling their souls. We intentionally use God language—something as simple as “I too wonder what God would have us do today. I too hope for a change that is just. I take comfort in times of silence, in the rituals of church, in quiet prayer. Where do you find comfort?” In all of this, Christ is our guide and companion and the Holy Spirit is the spark that motivates us—but ultimately we are the ones to bear hope and provoke change in our world.

When Moses was dying, he gave a farewell speech to those who'd followed him for so many years. He reminded the people to love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul. Then he said these words, found in Deuteronomy 30: *Surely this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and see it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and see it?” No, the word is very near to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart for you to see.*

That's the beauty of the other Christmas story. It builds on what the Old Testament long believed and what the New Testament reveals to still be true—that the word of God—Christ's word of justice, of peace, of joy—is for you and is in you. We'll talk more next week about the end of this other Christmas story. For right now, get ready to leave the temple, this church, and be that sign for someone else. AMEN.