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Trinity Episcopal Church

Baruch 5: 1 – 9

Canticle 16

Philippians 1: 3 – 11

Luke 3: 1 – 6

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Today, we get to hear a beautiful passage from Luke that we don't get to hear very often. It is what we said together in place of the psalm: Canticle 16, also known as the Song of Zechariah.

Zechariah, of course, is the father of John the Baptizer, whom we hear about in today's Gospel reading. A reminder of the backstory of Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth are very devout Jews, with a proud lineage. They are, in fact, "blameless" in following of all the laws and commandments. Zechariah is a priest, serving with his team, the priestly order of Abijah, on a rotating basis in the Temple. But Elizabeth and Zechariah are not getting any younger, and they have not been blessed with the gift of children.

About six months before he pays a call on Mary, the Angel Gabriel comes to visit Zechariah while he is serving as priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah is serving all by himself in the holiest place of all, the sanctuary of the Lord, and he is responsible for sending up incense. Everyone else is outside of the sanctuary. In this haze of aromatic smoke, Gabriel appears, standing by the altar.

Zechariah is, rather naturally, terrified. And overwhelmed. As always, though, Gabriel's first words are, "Don't be afraid!" Zechariah has apparently been praying consistently and fervently for Elizabeth to become pregnant. Gabriel lets him know that God has heard his prayers and has answered in the affirmative. They're gonna have a boy!! And, they are to name this boy John, which means 'God is gracious.' Which is a little unusual, because generally a son, especially a first son, is named after his father or someone in the family. Then, Gabriel tells Zechariah more about who his son will be. He'll be filled with God's Holy Spirit, he'll act with the spirit and power of Elijah, and he will turn many in Israel back towards God.

Zechariah, who is nobody's fool, asks how all this can happen (which is the very same question that Mary will ask six months down the road). After all, he and Elizabeth are no spring chickens and he knows how these things work. It seems like a reasonable question. But Gabriel does not appreciate Zechariah's inquisitiveness and feels that Zechariah doubts what he has to say. So, to make a point, he strikes Zechariah mute until the time the child is born and named.

Meanwhile, all those outside the sanctuary are wondering what is keeping Zechariah. When Zechariah does come out and can't speak, they know that something mystical has transpired. When his time of service is up, he returns home to Elizabeth in the hill country. One wonders how he conveys all of this to Elizabeth.

Nine months or so pass, during which the now pregnant Mary has come to visit and gone. Elizabeth, during the time of her husband's enforced silence, glories in the favor that God has shown her. [The early portion of Luke is like a Broadway musical, where everyone is suddenly breaking out into song.] One also wonders how much this strong, faithful woman takes advantage of Zechariah's silence to speak her own mind.

The time comes, and Elizabeth delivers the promised child. Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbors come to rejoice with them. As is the tradition, on the eighth day, the child is circumcised and named.

For some reason, the neighbors seem to think that it is their right to name the child, and so they assume that he will be Little Zeke, Zechariah, Jr. But Elizabeth, still relishing her autonomy, says, "No, his name will be John." What?? Where's that coming from? At last they begin to appeal to Zechariah with hand motions like charades – which is a little funny, because he is simply mute, not deaf. Zechariah asks for something to write on and writes, "His name is John." Gasp! Elizabeth perhaps has an "I told you so" look on her face. Immediately, however, Zechariah's voice is restored and, filled with the Holy Spirit, he bursts into the song we just said/sung.

Imagine, Zechariah holding his newborn son in his arms. There is awe and wonder a plenty when 'normal' parents meet their newborn. Imagine, someone who has experienced all that Zechariah has experienced, wondering just *what* in the heck, *who* in the heck, is now in his arms!! Imagine the joy in his heart, imagine the praise he has for God, imagine all that he looks forward to God doing through this wee little bundle!

What Zechariah sings is lovely, which is why the Church has been singing it for centuries. His words connect ancient Israel to the early Christians to whom Luke is writing. His words speak of Israel: remembered, redeemed, restored. Despite their history of being conquered and oppressed, the people of Israel have never been totally annihilated or without hope of a future because they know that God's promises are steadfast and true. Zechariah's words are like musical Cliff Notes of God's promises – God speaking through the prophets, the raising up of David as King, and the continual stream of mercy, grace and salvation in the face of Israel's sin and suffering.

Often times, those who have been around for a long time, our sages, are the ones who keep alive the corporate memories, the wisdom of lessons learned, and the imagination of a future with hope. It is obvious that Zechariah, in addition to pining for a child, has been thinking on these things for many years. Zechariah sings in words that bind the big picture to the little picture, that is, the universal to the particular, and in words that express hope that, in the end, God will put all things right.

Biblical scholars and theologians stress the continuity between the stories of ancient Israel and the Christian story. Many of them see Zechariah and his witness via this song as a link between the two, and as an affirmation that both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian story are all part of the same larger story of God at work in this world. Of God offering salvation to everyone. Even us. Many scholars also see this moment as Zechariah affirming or blessing his son's ministry, and therefore, the ministry of Jesus and his church.

And, like the line of prophets in which he stands, Zechariah doesn't just sing a remembrance of all that God has done for God's people, he also sings about the new things that God is doing, most of all, raising up a 'mighty savior' from the house and lineage of David. Notice that he sings in the past tense – God has already acted to raise up this savior. It's a done deal. Even though that 'mighty savior' is a three-month along child in Mary's womb.

Zechariah is standing there, holding his newborn son, John, and feeling this wave of grace from God. In this incredible moment, he is living through the rush of all that God has already done and the promise of what is yet to be. Zechariah is filled with hope, and a sense of future for this world as he gazes into the dark brown eyes of this tiny human being. Zechariah, who knows what it is like to stand in the holiest of holies, the "center of the world" from the Jewish perspective, is perhaps having the deepest, most introspective, most profound faith moment of his life as he simply rejoices in his son.

We, too, can relate to Zechariah's connecting the dots between the big things of the wider world and the little things of our personal lives. Zechariah and Elizabeth are experiencing the most amazing things in their personal lives, yet, in looking at their baby, they can also see God acting in the world. In this most gracious gift to them, they're also aware of God's gift to the world, the keeping of God's promises for all of Israel, what has been, what is and what shall be.

So in Advent, at this time of year when we are perhaps more in touch with what is deeply personal to us, how do we see in the events of our lives God at work in the world? Where and how does your story, my story, our story, merge into the larger story of God? How do we understand God's salvation (think healing, forgiveness, rescuing) to be present, not just in the ever after, but in the here and now? How might God be using *our* individual lives to keep God's promises? How are *we* using our lives to give the message of deliverance to the people of God who most need to hear it? How are we living into the forgiveness that we, ourselves, have already received from God? Where can we give Light to those who sit in darkness? How do we guide our own feet and others, into the way of peace?

As we journey through Advent – and beyond – may we continue to raise these questions for ourselves. May God's salvation become very real and embodied in our lives and in our love. May the hope that is ours, the hope of which Zechariah sings, be Light in the darkness for this world. May we trust as fervently as Zechariah, that, in the end, God will put all things right. +