

December 11, 2016
Luke 1:5-13
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“Fear and Possibility”

Good morning! This is the third Sunday of Advent, and we are getting closer to the birth of Jesus. Christmas may not be exciting for the same reasons that it was when you were a kid -- Christmas almost certainly takes more work and costs more money for adults than it does for children -- but I hope there is still a sense of anticipation. If you haven't already read it, I'd encourage you to check out our Advent devotional for this past Tuesday, December 6 to read about waiting for Christmas. One of our new Creekside traditions is the Cookie Walk, and I know for my family one of our enduring traditions is the Christmas Eve service, and especially the candlelighting. The light is coming! I hope you invite your family members and friends to share in that joy with us.

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally when the pink Advent candle is lit. Often the biblical text has something in it about joy -- perhaps from Mary, the mother of Jesus, who visits her cousin Elizabeth, and feels her child leap within her, and sings about how her spirit rejoices in God. We're not going to hear that magnificent magnificat text this morning, but I trust that a little pink will creep into our darkness with the coming of the light.

We have finally reached the New Testament! We have been watching and hoping along with the prophet Isaiah for the past two weeks. This is where Christ for the Ages begins: with the longing of the Jewish people for salvation and redemption; the longing for a Messiah -- the Anointed One who will unify and rule their nation with righteousness and peace. Our text this morning is from the beginning of the gospel of Luke, and it's a lesson in being careful what you pray for: because although God is always faithful, God is not always faithful in the ways

we expect. Keep that in mind while we consider this narrative of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Scott read just a portion of it -- I want to review some of what he read, because it's an important prelude to the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, and what Pastor Elizabeth will be sharing with us next week.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were a righteous couple, faithful Jews, both of whom came from well-known tribes and families. Zechariah was a priest in the Temple, a role which would have brought him honor and respect in their community. But Elizabeth and Zechariah lacked one thing: they had no children. Luke makes this sound like it was Elizabeth's fault for being barren, but there's no point in trying to assign blame, the fact was they didn't have any children, which was a sorrow to them and made their neighbors and Zechariah's co-workers wonder if they had displeased God somehow. Zechariah and Elizabeth were getting on in years, so they had gotten used to the idea of being childless, and had accepted it as their fate.

Until this happened: this story at the beginning of Luke. It was already an important day for Zechariah; he and the other priests drew lots, as was their custom, to see who would go into the holy of holies for the incense offering. This offering happened only twice a year, and only one of the priests could enter this inner sanctum of the Temple. Even Zechariah had probably been in here only a handful of times in his life. Outside in the outer courts of the Temple, there was a whole assembly of people praying. Zechariah goes in, minding his own holy business when BAM and angel of the Lord appears.

Zechariah reacts how any sensible person would -- especially a priest, who ought to know: he's terrified. Remember, the literal meaning of "angel" is messenger of God. This angel (who later introduces himself as Gabriel) is probably more of the flaming sword kind of messenger than the Precious Moments variety. Even though Zechariah was a righteous man, I suspect that like most of us, when confronted with a messenger from God, he's afraid. Gabriel understands this, because the first thing he says is: "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son." This ought to be really good news; *it is* good news: because this child is going to be John the Baptist, a prophet filled with the Holy Spirit in the great tradition of the Isaiah and Jeremiah and the prophets

Zechariah has studied in the Hebrew scriptures his whole life. But Zechariah has a little trouble taking this all in. He and Elizabeth have spent years coming to terms with being childless. Before he says anything like “God is great! Praise the Lord! Thank you!” He says, “How can this be? I’m an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” I can understand Zechariah’s confusion, but questioning an angel is not a good idea. Zechariah spend the next nine months not being able to speak.

I believe that Zechariah is doing what most of us do when confronted with growth and possibility: he’s afraid. He’s just been told his prayers have been answered, and he doesn’t see how such a thing can be. That’s the problem with waiting and longing: you might just get what you want, and then you have to figure out what to do with it. Many of us who are parents have experienced this phenomena: whether or not we were praying for a child, not sure if we were ready for a child, or pretty sure this wasn’t a good time, if you have any sense of responsibility at all, there was probably a time when you realized you were going to have a child and you were afraid. Am I ready to be a parent? What will it be like physically? Can I handle it emotionally? Guide this person spiritually? Make it work financially? And especially: how many soccer games, baseball practices, and music lessons am I going to have to go to? I believe that if we really knew the answers to these things ahead of time there might be fewer children in the world. If Zechariah knew that there was an angel waiting for him, he might have thought twice before stepping into the holy of holies.

We grow when we are willing to step into the places where we feel God calling, even when we are afraid. Growth is closely related to the Faithfulness and Wisdom, but growth comes first: we have to go through growth -- through fear and trust -- to become faithful and wise people. I want to share an image with you. This is the oldest cherry tree in the world -- at least that’s what the Japanese in Kyoto claim. You can see how heavy and gnarled the branches are -- they need supports to hold them up. But this tree is still growing. How can we tell? Because it’s covered with blossoms -- a sign of potential and possibility. These pink blossoms -- I told you’d I’d get some pink in here -- are the forerunners of fruit. No tree bears fruit until it takes the risk to blossom and grow. This tree has been growing for centuries.

I had a delightful visit with Diane Lund last week, and she showed me pictures of their family trip to France and Spain last April. She had a photo of an enormous blossoming cherry tree in Paris. It is likely not as old as this tree in Japan, but I bet it dated back at least to the 19th century. Diane had a beautiful photo of that blossoming tree with her family around it. It's a great image of maturity and possibility -- not just the tree, but the generations assembled in front of it.

Growth can happen at any age, but especially for those young adults who are experiencing the challenges of starting careers, raising children, helping aging parents or grandparents, trying to figure out how to manage all the demands on their limited time, I believe that we in the church need to say, "Do not be afraid. God has heard your prayers and God is faithful. God provides what we need to meet the challenges of every day." Sometimes what we need to grow is the support of other people. People who are farther along the road to faithfulness and wisdom, who have experienced how possibilities have blossomed and borne fruit in their lives. People who have been afraid and gone anyway. This is the gift that many of you can offer to the young adults in our midst, and the young adults who are not yet in our midst who we want to welcome. Do not be afraid: God is faithful.

Growth is not just for individuals, it's for groups of people -- even congregations and denominations. We need to be listening for where God is calling us, and if what we hear makes us afraid, or makes us think "How can this be?" then we should listen even harder. God has a way of calling us in directions which we did not expect to go. Growth is not for the faint of heart, because growth always changes how things have been.

I hope you are praying this season. I won't ask what you are praying for -- I know that's kind of a personal question -- but I wonder what would happen if you met an angel when you got home from Creekside today. I hope you might feel some awe or fear; or at least have enough respect to not say, "Hey, I'm glad you finally showed up! There's something I want." Remember, this isn't Santa Claus, it's a messenger of God. And if that angel said to you, "Fear not, your prayers have been heard," what would come next? Would your life become simpler or more complicated? Would things stay the same,

or would you have to grow into something new? What possibilities does God have in store?

Pastor Elizabeth and I will be sharing the service of anointing this morning. You are invited to come forward during our hymn to receive anointing for healing of mind, body, or spirit, and for commissioning for service. In this time of Advent, when we pray for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, consider how anointing calls us to the path of discipleship and growth, to follow our Lord and Messiah, the Anointed One. If you come forward for anointing, we will pray that you will receive healing and guidance from Christ, our Messiah. If you choose to come up for laying on of hands after the anointing, please consider how you can support and encourage your brothers and sisters as they seek to grow in the faithfulness and wisdom of God. Consider how you can show and share with one another this message from God, "Do not be afraid. God has heard your prayers and God is faithful."