

## **Jeff's Reflection: An Elderly Couple, an Angel and Hope!**

When Zechariah showed up for work that day, he didn't know he was going to meet an angel.

He didn't know that his world was about to change.

And he didn't know that he, Zechariah, a priest in the land of Judah, was about to learn something about faith.

Zechariah was married to Elizabeth. She was a descendant of Aaron, who had been the brother of Moses – Moses who had followed God into the wilderness. Moses, whom those who suffered under Pharaoh in Egypt, had followed into the wilderness. They had followed Moses as he followed God.

We are told that Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous before God. They followed all the commandments of God. They were faithful, dedicated, honourable people.

Then the story gets interrupted by that little word that tells us that this story is about to get unsettled. The story gets interrupted by that little word 'BUT'....'But' Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children; But they were both old.

Those who know the stories of the Jewish faith know what that 'But' probably means – surprise, there's soon going to be a baby in this story.

We know that because we know of Abram and Sarai, who were old, who had no children, and then a messenger from God said that they were about to be parents. They would name their child Isaac – a name that means laughter – because when elderly Sarai heard that she was going to give birth, she thought that was such a crazy idea that she laughed.

Throughout scripture, other women who are not supposed to ever conceive a child, give birth. Rebekah gives birth to Jacob and Esau. Hannah gives birth to the prophet Samuel, who later in life would anoint Saul and then David as kings of Israel.

So, it is quite likely that when people in the first century heard the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah being told in the gospel of Luke, they would have smiled when they heard that the old couple couldn't have children, and when that word 'But' butted into the story, they would have muttered, "I knew it, here comes baby."

They would know that Elizabeth and Zechariah are about to become parents. They might even suspect that there's going to be an angel somewhere in this story...and so there is!

Zechariah is doing his priestly duties in the temple sanctuary when the angel Gabriel appears. While we would like to think that angels are kind of like friendly good luck

charms, people in the Bible seldom find it comforting to suddenly encounter a messenger from God popping up amidst their daily routines. Zechariah is not just startled...he is terrified. It is one thing to believe in God and to follow written commandments and directions, but when we suddenly find ourselves confronted by a presence that transcends our regular reality, when suddenly we are confronted with a presence that says that God is very real and God is wanting our attention, then our comfort zone collapses, our beliefs seem insufficient, and we will feel exposed, and we are afraid.

Zechariah was afraid. Angels apparently expect this reaction, so angels have a standard opening line, "Do not be afraid!"

And then Gabriel tells Zechariah that all those prayers he thought were just wishful thinking have found their way into the heart of God...and now God sends a message of hope, a message that says that despite Elizabeth's and Zechariah's ages, despite the impossibility of arthritic senior citizens conceiving a child, despite all the statistics, medical evidence and common sense that say Elizabeth and Zechariah will never be referred to as mom and dad – despite all that data that says 'no', hope intrudes with a new story, a new path, a new life.

Hope exists because, as Gabriel says to Zechariah, "God has heard your prayer." Hope is born from God's compassion, from the compassion of God who listens, who hears, who is aware of and attentive to our sufferings.

Hope isn't bound by the evidence. Hope opens unexpected futures. Hope - says Gabriel to Zechariah - will come to you in the birth of a son, whom you shall name John. This child will carry the spirit of God and will open people's hearts and imaginations to God's presence; and will awaken compassion and righteousness in people's lives. John will prepare people to be God's people.

Unfortunately, Zechariah is momentarily stuck in the usual story of data and proof, and so asks the angel, "How will I know that this is true? After all, myself and my wife are old...are getting on in years."

Gabriel the angel replies saying, "How will you know it's true? You know because I told you so. You know because I come from God."

And because Zechariah did not engage the story of the angel, Zechariah is rendered mute. He will not be able to speak again until after the birth of John. He will not go forth to share the script that says this is impossible. He will not speak. He will watch. He will listen. In a divinely imposed-silence he will discern God's Spirit moving in the lives of himself and Elizabeth.

We make the same mistake Zechariah made if we get caught up asking how we can know if this story is true.

Because this is a story about God and stories about God don't provide us with measurable facts and proofs. Stories about God ask us to trust the story, to trust that God is present in this world, to trust that new life can emerge from our places of wilderness, to trust that even after a cross and a tomb may come resurrection.

Faith trusts. Faith chooses to trust that God is active, even when all the circumstances and news stories suggest otherwise. Faith trusts, and then lives from that centre of trust, walks that path of trust, loves others because we trust the stories of God's love.

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we begin this season of preparing to again welcome the birth of Christ in this world, we will light the Advent candle of hope – because hope is not certainty, hope is not fool-proof prediction. Hope is choosing to trust that the future is still open, that there are beginnings on the other side of endings, that there is a new horizon visible when we reach the horizon we currently can see.

Hope is trusting that God hears the prayers and cries of those who yearn for justice, peace, reconciliation, compassion and a love that embraces all people and all creation.

This story of Elizabeth and Zechariah and Gabriel reminds us once again that God is glimpsed in unexpected and unheralded people and places. An obscure and elderly couple will parent a child who will call people to repent, to reimagine the world as God's world, to hope that a different way of living in neighbourly love is possible.

Hope enters the world through this elderly couple who had abandoned all hope of being parents. Hope enters the world as God births new creation and invites us to trust the God stories whispered through ancient stories, the God stories sung in the lyrics contained in well-thumbed hymn books, and in the God stories proclaimed through lives of compassion and generosity and blessing...through lives embodying hope, embodying trust in the God we prepare to encounter again in the Bethlehem birth.

We are now an Advent people, a people of faith, a people of trust, a people of hope.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. Thanks be to God. AMEN