

And You, Child
Luke 1:67-79

I know you've heard this story:

There's a woman who couldn't possibly be pregnant;
and this woman has a man
who's shocked by an angelic visitation telling him about the pregnancy;
and eventually there comes this little, baby boy,
who is prophesied to become great...

It's the Christmas story.
But it's not about Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

The Gospel-writer Luke is very careful in preparing the Good News for his audience. If you read his first chapter, from which this morning's text comes, you'll note that he provides significant details to draw us into the particular context of his setting: he begins his story, "In the days of King Herod of Judea" (1:5).

Right off, then, Luke's audience realizes that Israel is a land under the domination of Rome and Rome's vassal king Herod. Things aren't all as they could be in a perfect world.

Later on, in a part of the story we'll hear on Christmas Eve, Luke offers further context in the form of a decree by the Roman Emperor Augustus:

"that all the world should be registered" – presumably for a tax (2:1).

I'm sure everyone was thrilled to have to pick up their lives and travel just so they might be made to pay more taxes.

So here we have the beginning of Luke's Good News story, set firmly in the midst of Israel's oppression.

And in the midst of that oppression, at the leading edge of his story, Luke introduces this family.

"In the days of King Herod of Judea,
there was a priest named Zechariah...

His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

Both of them were righteous before God...but they had no children,
because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years" (1:5-7).

As a priestly family, they may have been okay-off...
better than some, worse than others; but with their own problems.

Fast forward to this morning's reading,
Zechariah's hymn of hope at the birth of his son:
he sings, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them".

The form of this canticle may seem familiar:

God's saving acts, the celebration of hope in a time of uncertainty.

Like many psalms and songs throughout scripture,
Zechariah's wondrous words recount the litany of God's

relationship with God's people.

"God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David...Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham..."

This is the collective memory and faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth's people.

The songs of their scriptures recount over and over the stories of their oppressions and their redemptions.

This is their history and this is their hope.

Something has happened to bring them hope, an unexpected something and so once again, even in their time of turmoil, the song is raised,

"Blessed be the God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them".

And this song, Luke tells, is sung *before* Jesus' birth.

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Zechariah – after a muteness brought on by his wonder at the angel Gabriel's prophecy – finally utters his first words in 9 months.

These first words are to his newborn son, John;

these first words are the Holy Spirit's inspired prophecy,

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways".

Luke has set it up beautifully:

The memory of hard times past

laid alongside hard times in the present;

The memory of hope from the past

brought forward as hope in the present.

And Jesus isn't even born yet.

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Jesus isn't born yet.

At least, not in the story. And not in our Liturgical calendar, either.

This is precisely where we are in Advent:

waiting, expectant, hopeful in the promise of

Emmanuel, the Messiah, the Christ child.

We have faith that Christ will, indeed, be born in us anew;

and yet, we're not quite sure how

or what that means

or how it may affect our lives.

And as we do our preparing and expecting (and wondering and questioning),

along comes this story of Mary's cousin Elizabeth,

her priest-husband Zechariah,

and their infant son John.

A separate story entirely for us to take in

as we await the "real" Christmas story...

and yet, Luke insists that *this is a part of the story*.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah speaks his blessing on John:
 “And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways”.

This child will, eventually, become John the Baptizer
 who preaches to the people in advance of Jesus’ ministry;
 he will prepare their hearts to open and prepare room for new teachings.

But even now, just an infant, this child prepares the way for the Christ.

...Where is that child?

Is it possible for Christmas to come without
 the preparations of this small, seemingly insignificant
 and often forgotten part of the story?

Where is that child who will be called the prophet of the Most High?
 Who will go before and prepare Christ’s ways?

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Many of you had the opportunity to attend last night’s  
 vigil prepared by our Sr. High youth.

This event began last year as a sleep-out to raise awareness,  
 and it was inspired by our kids wanting to do something that particularly affects our community.

It was around Thanksgiving last year that their conversation  
 moved from what they were thankful for  
 to what gifts they had.

How might they, then, share these gifts;  
 and in sharing, how might they prepare  
 for the new season that was beginning?

In this season of growing darkness – as days get shorter and nights longer –  
 we become more keenly aware of the shadows,  
 of things hidden in the dark,  
 of needs not our own.

As weather grows colder  
 we recognize more readily how much we appreciate  
 the warmth and comfort of our homes.

As we re-tell the story of Mary and Joseph wandering, seeking shelter,  
 we can easily wonder:  
 who will make room where there *is* no room?

I’m not claiming that all of this ran through their thoughts as the youth started their planning.

In fact, the process, as I remember it,  
 seemed much more passionate than premeditated...

But that passion was one of the gifts our youth had to offer.

And by that passion,  
 which inspired a sleep-out and donations and a vigil,  
 and even some of these young people serving on boards of directors where they can effect change –  
     in these actions I see the making concrete of Zechariah's words:  
     “and you, child: you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways”.

The ways of enlarging our awareness of our community,  
 of our neighbors,  
 of ourselves.

    The ways of remembering hope in times of uncertainty.

In their actions,  
 these youth are living the hope that they can make a difference –  
     for the families that visit the Homelessness Prevention Initiative,  
     for the people who stopped by and may have been inspired to do more, and for themselves  
     in their passion to make room where sometimes seems there is no room.

In that space of time yesterday out by the street it was as if they were shouting,  
     “Prepare the way on Prospect Road!  
     The Messiah draws near” -  
     Right here where we sometimes wonder  
     how we can possibly make more room;  
     where we wonder how we can make a difference.

We can ask why some have more than others  
 but still take comfort in having.  
     We can provide space for this work and a place for the passion to build;  
     we can offer financial and emotional support;  
     we can seek understanding  
     and pray for practical knowledge  
     and strive for foundational change.

And you, child will be called prophet of the Most High.  
 In their passionate care, these youth are preparing the way!  
 But they're not the only ones...  
     Who else is called to be the prophet of the Most High this year?  
     Who else will go before the Christ  
     to prepare his ways and open closed doors?

What about you? And you, child? And you, child? And me?

We are the only ones who can prepare the way for the Messiah's coming.

If you were the prophet of the Most High,  
 if you, today, were preparing the way for the Messiah,  
 how would you do it?  
     What would your preparations be, and for whom?  
     Maybe it's in supporting the youth's work for homelessness awareness;  
     or by taking it further to create structural change?

By making a home-cooked meal for someone who needs the love of a neighbor,  
or taking some time out specifically to share with a sick friend.

We don't do these things to make ourselves feel better this time of year,  
(because this *is* the season when we tend to think about giving more).

We don't do these things because of guilt,  
We do them to prepare the way.

By acting in the world,  
we prepare the way for Christ,  
making room "out there" and within ourselves.

Remember:

in their conversation that started yesterday's event,  
the youth began with their thanksgivings,  
and then moved to their gifts...  
...these gifts and passions are each of *our* means of preparing the way.

If I'm not gifted in working with statistics and figures,  
then I'm not going to use them to solicit help.

If I don't have the talent to write a song for a vigil,  
then I'm not going to even try.

But if I love scripture and find relationship  
between our story in its stories,  
in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and John,  
then I will use them to help prepare the way.

Where do your passions lie;  
and how can you use them to prepare the way of the Lord?

For "you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High;  
you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways".

Through your gifts and passions in this season of preparation,  
may you prepare the way  
that all may know the hope of Christ's birth.

Amen.