“Always Faithful”

Luke 1:5-13, 57-80

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On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we take a leap from the Old Testament to the New Testament!

For the past several months we have been working our way through the Old Testament.

Hearing the stories about Abraham and Jacob, Ruth and David.

Several of those big names which make up the grand story of the Bible.

Last week you heard one of the final big stories from the Old Testament, about the people of God returning from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple.

During that time, several prophets declared that one would come who would save the world.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel had all spoken about this in one way or another

For several hundred years, the people would be under the power of one empire or another.

So they anxiously awaited the day when their messiah would arrive.

There were various opinions on what this messiah would look like.

Some thought he’d be a military leader.

Others thought he’d be like King David, a royal leader.

Still others thought he would simply be a spiritual leader.

As we will hear over the next few months, the Messiah turned out to be nothing like what the people expected.

So now the story makes a sharp turn as Christmas draws near.

Preparing to welcome in the Christ child.

Our lectionary cycle for this year will focus on the Gospel of Mark.

But that book is rather scant on details of Jesus’ birth and childhood.

In fact, Mark doesn’t even mention Jesus as a baby or a boy.

The first mention of Jesus is his baptism, later in his life.

This morning and on Christmas Eve, we will spend a bit of time with the Gospel of Luke,

which does a much better job of telling the story of Jesus’ first days and years.

Next Sunday we will switch over to the Gospel according to Mark, and we’ll work our way through it until Easter.

Today we hear the story of Zechariah and some shocking news he received.

This event takes place roughly 500 years after the story you heard last week.

So we’re jumping ahead quite a bit on the timeline.

It’s a bit of a long text, so I’ll be reading it in segments.

Feel free to keep your Bible open to the text in order to follow along as I go.

We begin in chapter 1 at verse 5.

Let us continue to listen for the Word of God.

[Vs. 5-7]

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

The Gospel of Luke gives a pretty clear understanding of who Zechariah and Elizabeth are.

We are told that Zechariah comes from the order of Abijah, a respected priestly line.

And Elizabeth is a decedent of Aaron, brother of Moses.

They both have very holy blood.

And not only do they come from impressive family trees, they are really good people.

Like genuinely good.

They are righteous and live blamelessly.

They follow all of God’s commandments.

They are what you might call salt of the earth kind of people.

But they struggle with a major problem, in that they haven’t been able to have a child.

This is a familiar story in the Bible.

We heard it with Sarah and Abraham.

With Rebecca and Isaac.

With Rachel and Jacob.

To be barren was a major problem.

Having children was vital in those days.

It’s how the people of God kept their covenant with God.

It’s how their family line carried on.

It’s how they survived retirement as their children took care of them.

No doubt Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a child.

They asked God to bless them with a baby.

They must have devoted much time in asking God for this request.

Have you ever prayed for something with all that you have?

Fervently hoping God will grant your request?

I recall the first time I said such a prayer.

It was the summer before I entered 4th grade.

One of the teachers at my school retired and a new teacher was replacing her.

Her name was Mrs. Schell and she was rumored to be legendary.

The best teacher in the school’s history!

All of my classmates were excited about her and all us wanted to be in her class.

I still don’t know how those rumors got started, but we were all convinced that having Mrs. Schell for 4th grade was going to mean having the best year ever.

No other teacher could compete.

So I spent that summer in prayer.

I thought surely if I prayed hard enough, God would place me in Mrs. Schell’s class.

I even found a seashell to hold as I prayed, thinking perhaps it would serve as some sort of good luck charm as I voiced those prayers to God.

Mrs. Schell, Mrs. Schell, Mrs. Schell, I prayed over and over.

August rolled around and the class lists were posted outside the school.

I rode my bike over to find my name, confident that God had heard me.

I scrolled my finger down the list, confused when I didn’t find it on her roster.

I looked once more and still didn’t see it.

I scanned over to another list, thinking they’d left me off altogether.

But there I was, listed under Mrs. Harper’s name.

I was dumbfounded.

My 9 year old brain couldn’t decipher what had happened.

I prayed! I thought.

I go to church! I thought.

I have perfect attendance at Sunday School! I thought.

Surely God would show me favor for keeping my end of the bargain.

And for devoting all that time in prayer over the summer.

Yet it seemed my prayer went unanswered.

Or worse still, that I was being punished for some reason.

I have to wonder if Elizabeth and Zechariah thought God was punishing them.

For what, I don’t know, since they were blameless and pure.

But perhaps they too experienced a bit of resentment when God seemed to ignore their prayers.

We’re from a holy priestly line! They thought.

We follow all of the commandments! They thought.

We live righteously! They thought.

Such thinking falls into the works righteousness category, which is the belief that we can somehow earn God’s grace and blessing.

It turns out, that’s not how it works.

God is mysterious and responds to our prayers in mysterious ways.

This is certainly the case for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

If we read on, we’ll see why:

Vs 8-13

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Here we see Zechariah has been chosen to enter the sanctuary and offer incense.

This was the most sacred of tasks, reserved for only the most worthy of priests.

This was to be the pinnacle of his career.

This was his shining moment as a priest.

It just so happened that this was a holy day and all of the people were gathered outside praying.

Zechariah was placed front and center, with the mass of people watching.

You could say he was under a bit of pressure that day.

And in the midst of this very big day, an angel shows up and tells Zechariah that they will have a baby.

They will have a son and his name shall be John.

We usually refer to him as John the Baptist.

For the sake of time, we won’t read all of this story.

We’re going to skip the part where the angel describes what his son will be like.

The role that he will bear.

We’ll skip the part where Zechariah doesn’t believe the angel and is rendered mute as a result.

We’ll skip the part where Elizabeth visits her cousin Mary, who was also pregnant with a very important child.

We’ll skip ahead to verse 57.

Vs 57-66

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

We see here that the boy is born and Zechariah and Elizabeth’s prayer is finally answered.

Although not quite in the way they wanted.

They probably wanted a child who would carry on the family name and take care of them in their old age.

But the angel told them his name was to be John.

And that his life would be set apart for a special task.

That he would be the one to prepare the people for the coming messiah.

This is a bittersweet blessing.

They have a child, yes, but he wasn’t destined for an ordinary life.

Nor a very long life.

From the start, Zechariah and Elizabeth must have known their son would have an untimely death.

For the task he was given was a dangerous one.

Indeed he would later be imprisoned and killed for the words he would preach.

I can only imagine the mixed emotions Zechariah and Elizabeth felt, knowing all of this.

Joy over having a baby, and sadness over knowing his fate.

God has indeed responded faithfully to Zechariah and Elizabeth’s prayers.

But in a way they didn’t expect.

I suppose that’s how we should always treat prayer.

That we ought to trust that God will respond, but that it might not be in the way we expect.

Like when I prayed to be placed in Mrs. Schell’s 4th grade class.

I made up my mind that the only acceptable response from God would be to give me exactly what I asked for.

What I didn’t know then was that God always knows better than we do.

God always knows exactly what we need.

When I was placed in Mrs. Harper’s class, I was disappointed at first.

But through the course of the year I was blessed by the experience.

It led me to a friendship with a girl who is still my best friend, over 20 years later.

But I couldn’t have known that, when I prayed that summer.

I couldn’t have seen the vision God had for my life.

That a seemingly unanswered prayer was a surprise blessing.

Of course, I didn’t put these pieces together until many years later.

But it has helped me to reflect on other moments in life when my prayers seemed to go unanswered.

I now see that God always responds, just not quite in the way we expect.

That God blesses us, not because we are righteous and worthy, but because God’s grace is beyond our comprehension.

That God is always faithful, even when it is hard to see it.

Zechariah understood this well.

After his son was born and named and circumcised, Zechariah was allowed to speak again.

And his words are filled with a beautiful reflection on who God is.

Let us now read this last portion of the story, and let Zechariah’s prophecy be a song in our hearts, reminding us of God’s faithfulness and response to our prayers.

Vs. 67-79

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Amen.