

Standing in the Presence of God (Angels Advent 1)

Luke 1:5-25

November 27, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

Despite my best internet research efforts, I can't figure out how "hope, peace, joy, and love" became the predominant themes for Advent candles. They don't particularly correspond to the lectionary readings, which we aren't using this year anyway. They are referenced in website after website, church after church, as if they are common and undisputable knowledge. Protestants and Catholics alike, pretty much anyone who observes Advent, carry this common understanding. But as far as I can tell, someone made them up some Advent some unknown number of decades ago, and they caught on like wildfire, to the extent that they are now obvious. The first candle symbolizes hope. Everyone knows that. I've ignored them for a long time. They aren't wrong, or bad things to think about, or contradictory to Advent or Christmas or anything, but they just don't seem to have a clear origin in Scripture or a deep rootedness in tradition, so I've felt free to discard them.

This year, though, they seem to pair up well with the Angels of Advent book we're going to be studying. So we're dusting them off to hear what new insights they might bring. I figure an extra helping of hope or peace or joy or love sure couldn't hurt anything, and can probably be helpful for us anyway.

So let's look for hope as we explore the interaction between Zechariah and the angel Gabriel.

This is not the debut appearance for the angel Gabriel. He has appeared before, in the book of Daniel, which isn't one of the books usually referenced or alluded to by the Gospel writers, but Gabriel pops up in a vision to Daniel. Presumably Zechariah would know that, since he's a priest of Israel. Presumably Luke's audience would also know that. Gabriel brings a hopeful message to Zechariah and Elizabeth, though he just appears to Zechariah.

Zechariah is a priest, and Elizabeth is also from the priestly family branch of the people of Israel. They are thus righteous and pious and upright. They have not been able to have children, but they are thus proof positive that barrenness isn't a punishment for bad behavior, but just happens. Because they were good, favored, honorable. Nevertheless, they have no children, and Elizabeth is getting old. We presume Zechariah is also getting old.

Before the angel appears or opens his mouth, yes, we're supposed to be on

alert. If we were dogs or horses, our ears would be pricked up. A childless couple, beyond the age of child bearing. Abraham and Sarah as we read about this morning, and several other couples in the Old Testament. Those are all supposed to pop into our minds. Of course a baby is about to appear on the scene, and there will be something special about the upcoming child. One couple's hopeful expectation will be fulfilled, and that hope fulfilled will be a blessing not just for one family, but for the whole nation and the whole world.

Zechariah is in a holy place, performing holy work, but I think we get the sense that Gabriel might have appeared to him anywhere, doing anything, if Zechariah had been paying attention. Gabriel will show up later in more ordinary circumstances. But Zechariah is primed to have a holy experience there, performing his holy duties in the holy place of the Temple. Maybe he's even hoping to have a holy experience. Don't we harbor those hopes too? To have holy experiences in holy places? Gabriel appears. Like everyone else who sees an angel, Zechariah is terrified. And like everyone else, he hears the same words first: "Don't be afraid."

Gabriel's message to Zechariah is that his hopes, which he had probably given up on, will be fulfilled. He and Elizabeth will have a son. And that son, true to the pattern set in the stories of Israel, will be special. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

Zechariah, no matter how much he had hoped for this very thing, no matter that he was in a holy place performing holy duties, no matter that Gabriel had behaved exactly how angels behave and said exactly what angels say, can't quite believe the good tidings that Gabriel brings.

Gabriel says, I am the Lord's messenger. I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of the Lord, and I bring you this good news. Believe it. Your hopes have been fulfilled, and your fulfilled hopes will bless not just your family, and not just your people, but the whole world.

Zechariah's and Elizabeth's hopes have endured through years and years. And they are finally being fulfilled. The angel brings that message to Zechariah straight from the Lord.

I want to take a short detour and talk about the meanings of the names of all of these people, because the names tell a story in themselves. The angel Gabriel, whose name means "God is my strength," appears to Zechariah, whose name means "God remembers" and gives him good news for himself and Elizabeth, whose name means "God is a promise." In God's strength, God remembers the promise and fulfills Zechariah's and Elizabeth's hope. The baby's

name is to be John, which means "God is gracious." God's grace is the fulfillment of a promise that God remembers, all delivered by God's strength.

We have hopes. We have hopes that we think we may have held on to for too long, that we've mostly given up on. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been hanging on to hope, too. We have prayers that we've prayed so many times they're getting frayed and faded. So did Zechariah and Elizabeth, so did the people of Israel praying outside the Temple that day. We have holy times and holy places. So did Zechariah and Elizabeth. We have a gracious God, a God of strength, a God who remembers promises. So did Zechariah and Elizabeth and God's people and the baby who would grow up to be John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for the fulfillment of the hopes of the people. That same gracious God knows our hopes and hears our prayers. In God's good time, God will remember the promises and hear our frayed and faded prayers and fulfill our long held hopes. Likely not in the way we had imagined. But that gracious promise remembering God is trustworthy, as Zechariah and Elizabeth discovered, through the messenger Gabriel.