

12-5-21

Second Sunday of Advent

Close to Home: Laying the Foundation

Luke 1:57-60; 67-79

**Prayer of Illumination: Let us join our hearts in prayer.**

God, who speaks a good news language—we admit, listening has never been our greatest gift. We are easily distracted, our minds run a million miles a minute. So today we bow our heads and ask for help. Settle our hearts. Quiet our minds. Steady our breathing. Help us to rest in you. Help us to listen for your good news. Gratefully we pray, amen.

The Gospel of Luke begins not with the narrative around the birth of Jesus, but rather the narrative of John the Baptist. We hear that in the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah and his wife was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God. They had no children and both were getting on in years. One day when Zechariah was serving in the temple he was chosen by lot to enter the most sacred space in the temple - the sanctuary of the Lord. While he was in there, an angel came to him. Zechariah was terrified; 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

Zechariah responded with doubt, reminding the angel that he and his wife are old. The angel Gabriel responded that he had been sent by the Lord to bring this good news and furthermore, because Zechariah did not believe this message, he would become mute, unable to speak until the day these things occur. Elizabeth did conceive and Zechariah remained mute throughout her pregnancy.

We pick up the story here in Luke chapter 1 verses 57-60 and followed by Zechariah’s prophecy beginning in verse 67. Hear the word of the Lord...

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.”

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

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

He has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

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,  
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.

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

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In scripture, it is called prophecy. In the global marketplace and political sphere, it is called “superforecasting.” On the New York Times Ezra Klein podcast this week<sup>1</sup>, Julia Galef interviewed Univ. of Pennsylvania professor Phil Tetlock, the author of the 2015 bestseller, *Super Forecasting, The Art and Science of Prediction*, co-authored with Dan Gardner. In the interview they dove into the science of predicting everything from North Korea launching missile strikes to when we will see self-driving cars. I was particularly taken by the discussion on how personality and strength of ideology affects our accuracy in making predictions.

Tetlock and colleagues have examined if there are certain experts who are more accurate than other experts. These are “experts” we might hear in the news or on Facebook or even around the Christmas dinner table. They found that some experts really were substantially better than chance. And there are other experts who actually managed to do worse than chance. They found an individual difference variable that predicted which experts fell into which category. The **more flexible foxes** tended to do better than chance. And the **less flexible hedgehogs** tended to do somewhat worse than chance. So now you are thinking to yourself.... Am I a fox or a hedgehog? Tetlock describes the hedgehogs as the kinds of people who see the world through one big idea, one ideology. And so they aren’t very flexible in their worldview. They aren’t as likely to update their opinions or predictions when new information arises. You find hedgehogs on all sides of ideological fences. On the other hand, foxes aren’t attached to one particular ideology. They really try to incorporate a wide range of worldviews into their thinking. They tend to be more intellectually flexible. And more accurate in their predictions - better superforecasters.

Which brings us back to our friend Zechariah, whom Tetlock would most certainly classify as a inflexible hedgehog - a hedgehog who happens to get exactly right his prophecy of his son

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-podcast-philip-tetlock.html>

John. Zechariah, who had not been able to speak throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy because he doubted the word of God, apparently spent that time drawing closer to God and listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit. And boy did the Holy Spirit respond. Zechariah is no flexible fox; he does not incorporate a wide range of views – he speaks as a priest who knows to whom he belongs – the Lord God. Zechariah knows that the most accurate indication of what God will do – how God will use his son John – is by looking back at what God has done throughout history. Talk about super forecasting.

Zechariah's words - really a canticle or song - are known as the Benedictus - after the first two words in Latin - "Blessed be..." We sang this Benedictus in our first hymn this morning: "Blest be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free; who visits and redeems us, who grants us liberty." <sup>2</sup> Zechariah's song is divided into two sections - first he gives praise to Lord God of Israel for all the Lord has done - for looking favorably upon the people, raising up a mighty savior through the line of David; praising the Lord for remembering the covenant made with Abraham; remembering that Lord saved the people from their enemies.

Zechariah doesn't stop with praise. He goes on to provide prophecy about the life of his son John. How John is laying the foundation of our home with the Lord. Zechariah speaks tenderly to his child, telling him that he will be called the prophet of the Most High and that he will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. He echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah we heard spoken this morning by the Nessa family. John will be the voice that cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Zechariah ends his canticle with these beautiful words: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

To guide our feet into the way of peace...into the way of shalom. As pastor and professor Randle Mixon comments, "Zechariah's great hymn ... moves us toward that unfathomable, whole, creation-healing shalom of God. Here we find ourselves waiting and watching for something we deeply desire, wondering if it will ever come. We may long for peace but we know we live in a world in which there is much too little of it, both personally and politically."<sup>3</sup>

This week we especially long for peace – creation-healing shalom - as we mourn the deaths of 17 year-old Madisyn Baldwin; 16 year-old Tate Myre, 14 year old Hana St. Juliana, and 17 year-old Justin Shilling.

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<sup>2</sup> Glory to God Hymnal #109 *Blest Be the God of Israel*; Text by Michael Perry, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Randle R. Mixon *Luke 1: 68-79 Homiletical Perspective*. Feasting on the Word. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.) Westminster John Knox Press, 2009; p33.

This week in which we light the candle of peace, we also see so vividly that we live in a world where we so desperately need that peace. A peace that goes beyond words; a peace that calls us to action. A peace that says we will not accept acts of violence that rip the fabric of families and friends and community into shreds. A peace that says we must do more than express our thoughts and prayers to fix our tattered hearts and tear-stained faces. A peace where we don't villainize or attribute motivation, and yet still hold people accountable for their actions.

We so desperately need a peace that embraces both justice and mercy; embraces loving your neighbor and the common good as higher priorities than our individual liberties. A peace that compels us to examine the place in our society for weapons that are designed not for hunting or self-defense, but designed to kill at high rates. A peace that insists on appropriate mental health care for people of all ages, without stigma and regardless of the ability to pay. A peace that embraces shalom – God's basic intentions for humanity – that all people live in a condition of wholeness, wellness, harmony, integration and balance.<sup>4</sup> And our call as a faith community is do the hard work of shalom.

In his book about living a vulnerable faith, self-described writer, activist and community misfit, Jamie Arpin-Ricci notes that "Shalom is what love looks like in the flesh. The embodiment of love in the context of a broken creation, shalom is a hint at what was, what should be, and what will one day be again. Where sin disintegrates and isolates, shalom brings together and restores."<sup>5</sup>

We live in a world with far too much sin – far too much disintegration and isolation; far too much broken creation. We live in a world that is craving shalom, yet we are weary and fatigued and we often don't think we have the strength to do the work of restoration; to do the work of shalom. But we must, because shalom is what love looks like in the flesh. We can start small – write an email or call a legislator; send a note of support to a teacher, counselor, principal; to a student you know. Educate yourself about mental health resources in the community; speak up and yes pray; and pray more; pray that God will work through us to bring shalom into this world.

Zechariah sings, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace."

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<sup>4</sup> Excellent brief overview of shalom in *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* by Chris Marshall. Good Books; 2005. p12-14

<sup>5</sup> Jamie Arpin-Ricci, *Vulnerable Faith: Missional Living in the Radical Way of St. Patrick*. Paraclete Press, 2015.

There are a lot of people sitting in darkness this week. There are a lot of people sitting in the shadow of death this week. We are called to do God's work of bringing light – to be the dawn that breaks the darkness. We light the candle of peace to remind us that we have much work ahead. We light the candle of peace because we worship the Prince of Peace. Advent is a season of preparation – of preparing our hearts, of preparing our lives, of preparing the world for the incarnation – God coming in flesh to dwell with us - the ultimate act of love; an act of beauty amidst brokenness; an act of salvation and grace. An act of hope that compels us to respond. The foundation has been laid for us, now we must do the heaving lifting of building God's home here on earth. This Advent, may we be comforted by the One who dwells intimately with us. May we be a place of sanctuary for everyone wandering far from home. May we embody shalom.