

December 17, 2023

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Luke 1:57-66

How does a weary world rejoice? We allow ourselves to be amazed.

This Advent Season we are hearing the scriptures from the Gospel of Luke, interweaving Christ's birth with the parallel story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. Two weeks ago we heard the beginning of the story... The angel Gabriel told Zechariah, a priest serving in the temple, that he and his wife Elizabeth, despite their advanced years were about to bear a child. Like many of us in a similar situation, Zechariah expressed his disbelief. The angel Gabriel replied, "because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." When he had finished his service in the Temple, Zechariah returned home. We pick up the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth this morning in Luke chapter 1 verses 57-66:

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." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name."

Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

You can imagine the scene... Your neighbor Elizabeth has just given birth to a son. After all of these years of waiting to be blessed with a child, the miraculous has happened. It is such an unexpected event that her husband Zechariah has been rendered speechless throughout the pregnancy. And now it is time for the naming ceremony. In an era before big splashy gender-reveal parties, the gathering for the circumcision and naming of a child was a big deal, even if everyone knew that they were going to name him after Zechariah, who had wanted a son so badly for many years. After being taken aback by Elizabeth's proclamation of her son's name, the neighbors were craning their necks to see Zechariah's writing tablet, especially those that had wagered the new child's name would be Aaron, after the priestly lineage from which Elizabeth descended.

"His name is John." What? Wait – I know Zechariah has bad handwriting – he is a priest after all – but even with bad handwriting, there was no mistaking Zechariah or Aaron for John. "His name is John." It was eerily silent in that moment. The winds that normally whipped through

the hills, rustling the leaves on the olive trees had vanished. The birds had stilled their chatter. Even the children playing down road had sensed something was about to happen and had come expectantly to join the crowds, their eyes widened in anticipation of meeting the new kid on the block.

We were all amazed. Everyone was filled with awe – especially when Zechariah began to speak. It was as if his tongue been untied. We couldn't believe it. We had thought for sure that Zechariah was never going to speak again after having some kind of spell when he was in the temple. But here he was praising God. Praising God the promise he had been given by an angel had been affirmed. And that it was the angel who told him to name his child "John." We – all of the neighbors and all of the friends and family of neighbors – all of us were amazed. We couldn't stop talking about what had happened. I still think about the day, when we all stopped the normal business and busyness of life in the hill country and allowed ourselves to be amazed by what Zechariah shared with us. We were living in hard times, barely scraping by, taxes levied by the Romans making it difficult to eke out an existence, especially in years when the rains did not come. There were rumors everywhere about how the tax collectors and some of Jewish rulers like Herod were in cahoots with the Romans. Every week there seemed to be a new threat of violence. There was so much heaviness in the air – we all felt the weight of it. But on that day, we allowed ourselves to be amazed.

In their commentary on this scripture the authors at *A Sanctified Art*, pose the questions "How often do you allow yourself to be amazed? Wonder is all around us—can we recognize it? As we learn how to rejoice in a weary world, can we live in a way that allows amazement and wonder to surprise us often?"¹

Can we? Can we allow ourselves to be amazed in a world where questions are easily answered via Google, Siri and Alexa? Are we able to sit in mystery, quelling the impulse to know the whys and hows? Can we still be surprised in a world where we are saturated with information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year?

In our Old Testament passage this morning, Psalm 126, we hear that those who expect to reap tears were granted a surprise: shouts of joy. Amazement is a balm for the weary. As the Sanctified Artists note, "Allowing ourselves to be amazed requires a posture of paying attention—and then saying yes to wonder when it washes over us. Amazement is also a balm for the weary. It awakens those who feel numb. It renews those whose senses have been dulled. Surprisingly, it may turn into joy."²

There is a lot of awe and amazement in the beginning of Luke's Gospel. In addition to the neighbors being amazed, everyone in Bethlehem who hears the shepherds' good news is

¹ *A Sanctified Art. A Weary World Rejoices. A Sermon Planning Guide for Advent–Baptism of the Lord Sunday.* Developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity; 2023; p11

² *ibid*

amazed (a passage we will hear on Christmas Eve), and Mary and Joseph are amazed after they receive Simeon's blessing in the temple (a passage we will hear on December 31). Zechariah and Mary were both awed by the words of the angel Gabriel— wondering how this could be that they would become parents to children blessed by God and called to change the world. These occurrences of wonder, amazement and awe, changed the trajectory of their lives, shaped them to become messengers of the Good News.

How does amazement change or shape us? What does it compel us to do? When I was 7 or 8 so I read a biography of Maria Mitchell, the first woman to be a professional astronomer in the U.S. Mitchell lived on Nantucket Island and spent her nights looking at the sky. She discovered a comet and went on to found the Astronomy Department at Vassar College. I read her biography so many times, I was convinced I was reincarnated from her. I had the same love of the stars, the vastness, the beauty. For Christmas that year I got my first telescope and my dad and I would spend hours outside at night looking at the moon and whatever else we could find. I was captivated by the constellations, memorizing them and the stories behind them. I would search Andromeda for a hint of its galaxy, referring to it by its Messier number – 31- because it sounded more important. I loved the vastness and depth of the night sky. And I loved the mystery – what was lurking out there yet to be discovered. The sense of awe that filled me changed me – convincing me at a young age that I was going to become an astronomer and discover great new worlds.

When I was 12 I spent a summer at NASA Goddard Spaceflight Center, conveniently located next door to what would become my high school, participating in a program that paired junior high girls with female NASA scientists. This was 1979, so the program was called “Non-traditional Career Roles for Women.” I wrote computer programs for do-loops on keypunch cards and measured lunar craters with calipers. It makes me feel so old to think how much technology has changed in my lifetime. While I am sure it was quite tedious, I found it exciting work. The highlight of the summer was being in the control room as NASA was receiving the first images of Jupiter and its moons from Voyager 2. Our group of giggly and chatty tween girls were rendered speechless as the images were displayed on monitors. We were the first people on earth to see these high quality images from across the miles. And then like Zechariah's neighbors we couldn't stop talking about. In the carpools home each day home we would talk about what had seen, wondering how the signals could travel so far across the solar system and be reconstructed into an image. Amazement, awe and wonder. Speechless and then words tumbling out.

Alas my dreams of being an astronomer, were brought to earth by the realization that while my math skills were solid, they were not stellar. And the realization that most astronomers don't spend their nights sitting outside with a telescope looking heavenward. And that realization that some biologists can spend their days looking through microscopes, discovering emerging patterns that are breathtaking beautiful and mysterious. I fell in love with the field of neuroscience, I think because of the mystery of the brain. There was so much

we don't understand about why we behave the way we do; why we love and laugh; how we can live with hope and faith when the sky is raining down on us; how we can be amazed by the colors of a sunset, a baby's first steps, a loved one's smile in the last moments of life.

When I felt a calling to ministry, one of the most common questions I received was how does one go from being scientist to being a pastor. Some just cut to chase and asked the underlying question – how does one cross the chasm between faith and science? A lightning bolt that causes you to jump? A sliding down the mountain until you hit the bottom and crawling your way back up? I can't answer that question for everybody, but for me, I think it is that both science and faith share the commonality of wonder, amazement and awe.

In our scripture passage this morning, we heard that Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbors were amazed. The Greek verb typically translated as amazed has deep connotations. It is a compound verb that literally translates to stand outside of one's self, or to be driven out of one's senses. The English word ecstatic is derived from this Greek word.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbors began motioning to Zechariah to find out what name he wanted to give the child. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were ecstatic – they had joy so intense that they were taken outside of themselves.

Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. The promise of the angel Gabriel was fulfilled. The unimaginable had occurred. A quote I heard this week I think reflects where we find Zechariah. In the ceremony speech for the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Jon Fosse, Professor Anders Olsson, Chair of the Nobel Committee for Literature, describes Fosse's work as 'giving voice to the unsayable'. Fosse's writing revolves around the disorientation of the individual and the difficulties experienced in finding a path in life. This state of uncertainty can open a relation to the divine.³

It is in the state of uncertainty that we allow ourselves to be amazed. It is in the embrace of mystery that we allow ourselves to be amazed. It is in the still silence of centering prayer that we allow ourselves to be amazed that God is still speaking. It is the sense of awe we feel when the organ and the harp and the flute and the handbells and the voices of the choir are joined by the voices in the congregation singing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" as we did on Friday night during *Lessons and Carols*.

We allow ourselves to be amazed when we let go of certainty. Maggie Jackson is an author and journalist known for her writings on social trends, particularly technology's impact on humanity. Her latest book is *Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure*. In a recent interview, she describes her research on uncertainty as revealing a posture of wakefulness and arousal that occurs when you meet something new. "Uncertainty is really

³ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2023/ceremony-speech/>

about waking up and then being adaptive, being nimble, being at the edge of what you know. And that's exactly where the human being thrives. That's where learning occurs. ... It is being right at the edge of where your comfort zone ends. ... And that's where we learn because we're not retreating and clinging to what we already know."⁴

That is where Zechariah and Elizabeth and their neighbors and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds were living – in this state of uncertainty. When the things they thought they knew were turned upside down and their comfort zone had ended. When they allowed themselves to be amazed, to wonder what this would mean for them and for their world. Zechariah and Mary both break into song, sharing that the blessing they have received will change the world. They pass their blessings onto others.

One of my seminary professors, Bill Brown, has written a lot about wonder and he shares that, "Reading the Bible with wonder inspires passion: passion for God, passion for community, passion for life and for all that makes life whole and good. ... Bible-inspired wonder is what drives many to commit themselves to lives of justice and mercy, wisdom and hope, joy and perseverance, charity and responsibility. To borrow from Judaism, such passion leads to *tikkun olam*, to "repairing the world," or put another way, to a life of self-giving love for the world."⁵

How does a weary world rejoice? We allow ourselves to be amazed. And in our wonder and amazement we light candles of hope and peace and joy, embracing that God chose to dwell with us. We let go of needing to understand the mechanics of how everything happened, of debating fact vs. metaphor, and trying to prove or disprove each point in the story. Instead we allow ourselves to be amazed. We embrace the mystery of night sky filled with light that has travelled vast distances so we might take a moment to be inspired enough to work to repair the world. We embrace the joy of voices raised and bells rung in song, so we might experience the power of community and work to repair the world. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Maggie Jackson. The Recipe for Childlike Wonder: Uncertainty. Interview conducted by Thomas Burnett. The John Templeton Foundation Newsletter. <https://www.templeton.org/news/how-uncertainty-can-lead-to-childlike-wonder?ut=> November 10, 2023.

⁵ William P. Brown. Sacred Sense. Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015, p.13