

Sunday December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Advent III

Luke 1:5-17

“Christmas for Challenging Children.”

I found a cautionary tale for this covid 19 year that speaks to the theme of this week’s message. **Darth Vader built an entire Galactic Empire...** Wearing protective gear in sanitary environment. But it was all destroyed by a whiny brat without a mask who refused to stay home with his aunt and uncle. I don’t think that was George Lucas’ point for his sci-fi universe.

If you haven’t guessed yet, today, I suggest we reflect now on the joys of parenting, shall we. First, we visit Rickey, whose mother was furious with him. “Rickey”, she said “last night when I went to bed there were four cookies in the cookie jar. This morning there are only two. Can you explain this? “Well,” Rickey replied “it was kind of dark and I only saw two.”

In another home two children were shouting at each other and were about to come to blows when Mom entered the playroom. “You two are always arguing,” she scolded. “You need to learn to agree on things.” “We do agree,” said one child. “Yeah,” snarled the other. “We both agree we want the box of crayons right now.”

Then there was the little four-year-old boy who was visiting his aunt and uncle. He was a very outspoken little boy and he often had to be censured to say the right thing at the right time. One day at lunch time, when the aunt had company, the little boy said in a loud voice in front of the company, “Auntie, I want to tinkle.” Auntie promptly took him aside and said, “Never say that, Sonny. If you want to tinkle, say, ‘I want to whisper.’”

The incident was soon forgotten, until a few nights later when the uncle and aunt were sound asleep in their bed. The little boy climbed into bed with them and tugged on his uncle’s shoulder and said, “Uncle, I want to whisper.” Uncle said, “All right, Sonny, don’t wake Auntie up; whisper in my ear.” The little boy was sent home the next day. How do these precious little angels become, sometimes overnight, little devils?

It is no wonder Luke chapter 1:5-17 speaks so loudly to all parents. “This child will be a joy and a delight to you,” the angel said to Zechariah, “and many will rejoice because of his birth.” Do you remember what it was like when you first heard the news that a little bundle of joy was heading into your family? Can you picture that moment when you first held that tiny new life, with his or her scrunched up pink face?

Do you remember the wonder and the excitement of what that young life meant to you? Can you remember the pride of showing pictures to family and friends, attending school concerts, graduations, or seeing your son or daughter do well in sports or the arts? Of all the joys known to mankind, few are like that of the arrival of a new child. Psalm 127 says, “Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are [children] born in one’s youth. Blessed is the [one] whose quiver is full of them.”

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A quiver being of course the container carried by warriors that holds their arrows. Those of us who have children know the joy of that full quiver. Young children are a joy to watch as they learn, grow, and rattle around in that quiver we call a home. Children represent us to the world as people judge our character by our children's behavior; just ask any teacher. Children carry with them our dreams for the future, and yes whether we acknowledge it or not, they are our defense and security as age assaults us.

In fact, I am always teasing my children about the time down the road when I will have to come and live with them. Their response is often, "there are nursing homes you know." Our feelings and our hopes are mixed up with our children, whether they are still in our homes or grown adults, and this fact leads us right into the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah. The truths in this story can bring healing to our crushed expectations in regards to our offspring.

The first truth I want us to see in this biblical story is perhaps the hardest of all to accept. I am glad you are all sitting down to hear this, so here goes. Sometimes, you may not get the child of your dreams **when** you want them. Someone might say, "I thought for sure I'd be married by now and have kids, but it hasn't happened." Then someone else might say, "We've wanted a child for so long but nothing has happened."

And yes, there are some who might say, "Oh, no, I'm pregnant or my wife or girlfriend is pregnant. This can't be happening right now. This is a nightmare." Sometimes you don't have the child you want, when you want. Sometimes, it is also true that you don't have a child the **way** you want to have one. Couples today wrestle with the cost of fertility treatments, and high-tech medical treatments to try and conceive a child.

Others find joy and challenges by adopting children. Then there are of course those who never have any children, not for a lack of desire, but simple because it wasn't meant to be. Look again at Zechariah and Elizabeth. They had no child at all. Then they get a child in a way and at time in their lives no one expected. The bible says these difficult words, "They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years." This dear couple, are senior citizens by the time we meet them.

In ancient societies like Israel, not having a child carried a great emotional pain with it. They had the pain we would expect them to have. Sentiments like, "We're not going to know what others seem to know" and more appropriate for Elizabeth and Zechariah is the thought "who is going to look after us in our old age?" On top of this Psalm 127 reads, "sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him."

The populist theology in Zechariah's day was that being childless was punishment from God. They might have thought, "Maybe God doesn't give me a child because I am not worthy of such a gift, or maybe I would be a lousy parent." Then John was born, and I am sure Zechariah and Elizabeth still had their doubts about their parenting even after being blessed. Can you imagine the conversations they must have had?

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“Liz, how is that kid of ours ever going to get a real job or someone to marry? I mean, he is all dirty, and his clothes; he smells like a camel. And Liz, what about all that ranting he goes on about, like fire from heaven etc.” Then Liz replies, “I don’t know Zech. I’m just trying to get him to stop eating locusts. Oh, I’ve been such a bad mom.” Can you understand these feelings?

Sometimes the kids we get don’t look the way we want them to, study the way we want them to, marry the person we want them to, or believe in God the way we want them to. Then horrors or horrors, they don’t raise their own kids the way we want them to. We can start feeling like maybe there is, or was, something wrong with us that accounts for these problems. Now, there is nothing wrong with self-examination. In fact, it is a very good thing to examine one’s soul, and be concerned for the spiritual health of your children. One of the reasons we believe in God, and pray to God, is so he can help us develop a positive character that can influence our children to grow up properly.

But our thinking goes off the track when we begin to believe that God is some sort of cosmic ATM. It is a false belief to think that we can somehow bank up good deeds in heaven, so we can draw out blessings we desire later. In fact, the very opposite is true. The very heart of the gospel tells us that at the moment of our absolute bottom of our morality, is the very moment Christ comes and pours unearned grace into our lives.

One of the greatest heresies in the modern church is the belief that because good things are happening in my life, I must be living right, or because bad things are happening, I must be living badly. Jesus says in Matthew 5:45, “Your Father in heaven” is amazing in his grace. “He “shines his warming sun and his life-giving rains on the righteous and the unrighteous alike.”

So, there are times when we receive blessings, we know we don’t deserve, even when our moral state is way off base. And there are times when like Job, we think we have done everything right, but still our lives are a shamble. We know we made some deposits in our spiritual account, so how come we are not able to withdraw a blessing? Well, surprise! It isn’t about you. It isn’t necessarily because you’ve done something wrong that you don’t get what you want.

The bible goes out of its way to make it very clear that Elizabeth and Zechariah’s problem was not because of anything they did wrong. Verse 6 reads, “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.” The bible is holding up a big neon sign saying, *it’s not about them!* Sometimes we have to take the hurt of life off our shoulders, and give it in faith back to God, where it belongs. But I know, and you know, it isn’t easy to do that.

I do think that somehow, over the years, Zechariah and Elizabeth had come to terms with their pain. They somehow learned to hand it over to God. This trust didn’t happen overnight, but gradually over the years it grew until Zechariah’s turn came to serve in the temple.

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The bible says, “There appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. And the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah.’” Incidentally, do you know what the name Zechariah means? It means “God remembers”. God has not forgotten the needs of his people. “Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been answered,” said the angel.

The Greek verb for “heard” here implies God has been listening all along to Zechariah. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a Son, and you are to name him John,” which means, “God acts in grace.” And what an awesome display of grace God was about to pour out. Not only was this elderly childless couple about to get a son, ending their feelings of disgrace and fear, but their child was to prepare the way for the Messiah. John was to be “great in the sight of God.”

Further the angel said John would “be filled with Holy Spirit”- not just good education, good looks or the right advantages, but the Holy Spirit. This coming son of Zechariah would also lead “many people of Israel...back to the Lord their God.” He is going to make a difference, this kid. He is going to have an influence and legacy of staggering proportions. Think about this for a moment.

If Zechariah and Elizabeth had gotten exactly what they wanted, what kind of a child would they get? I’ll tell you: another run of the mill priest; another worker in the line of Levi. That would have been good. But God had something much grander in mind. They were to raise the greatest prophet to ever walk the land since Elijah. He was to prepare the people for the Messiah’s coming. So, here is what I hope you take away from Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story today.

First-in the midst of the disappointments with which you may be living as a parent, be it: a parent, a spouse, a worker, or in some other area of your life-consider for a moment that it is possible God has a long-term plan that is far grander than what you are experiencing today. Dare to believe that God may be denying you the good you think you want today because, in his perfect will, he is planning the best for you.

Second, if you happen to have a child who isn’t living up to your dreams, please remember that you are not the only one who has a vision for him or her. If Christmas tells us nothing else, it tells us that there is a Good Shepherd who cares for lost lambs. It also tells us that he will cross eternity to find them. He will insert himself in the dingiest stable; he will travel to the farthest country; he will climb a cross, if need be, to find his lost ones.

So, can you simply stay faithful like Elizabeth and Zechariah: to keep loving that child, keep declaring the gifts you see in them, and keep praying for them? Can you keep modeling before them a life truly lived in relationship with God? And even if that child is eating bugs right now, or wandering in the wilderness dressed poorly, God may have a plan for their lives that, if you could see it fully today, would fill you with “joy and delight”. It happened with Elizabeth and Zechariah’s child and it can happen to yours.

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The great Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen once said, “Songs, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, and sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying yes to a hope based on God initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is about believing that the salvation of the world is God’s work and not mine. There is a God of surprising grace, of long-working purpose, of sudden redemption. And this is good news for real people. People like you and me and those God has given to us to love.