

Sunday December 8th, 2024

Advent II

Luke 1:68-79

“Uncle Zechariah”

The story goes that a mother was appealing to her children to desire to care for orphaned children in other lands. She said, “These poor children don’t have a mother, a father, or even aunts and uncles. Would you children like to give anything to them?” The children discussed this request among themselves and then announced their decision: “Let’s give them Uncle Ron.”

I realize that there are some exceptions to the following observation, but most of us have at least one relative who we would be more than willing to trade away. Quite often this relative, who shall remain unnamed, is known more for their idiosyncrasies and misadventures than anything else. We might even go so far as to refer to them as that crazy uncle, aunt, or cousin, maybe even that grandparent. Who knows, maybe some of us in this room, like me, are the said crazy relative in our own families.

Those of us with extended family have numerous stories about a relative who did something shocking, silly, or socially rude. We have stories about: embarrassing exploits, gifts given that were highly inappropriate, or on the cheap side, or even illegal activities we wish would be forever hidden from a public view. Some stories, however, are priceless for humour, and become part of the family’s folklore, especially as time has passed and the wounds heal.

At the risk of being disowned by my own family, I retell an incident involving my maternal grandfather William Rich. My grandfather was a wonderfully caring man, whose childhood in Wales was one marked with severe poverty. Upon coming to Canada at the age of 17, he had a dramatic spiritual conversion experience in the Fifth Line Brethren church in Stayner Ont. and became very zealous for telling others about Christ.

Later in life, after my grandmother died, grandpa wanted nothing more than to travel; since he had been prevented from doing so as my grandmother was reluctant to travel due to compromised health. On one of these traveling adventures, grandpa accompanied my parents on a bus trip through the Pacific Northwest; a place he had always wanted to go. He had wanted so much to see the giant redwoods before he died.

Unfortunately, grandpa wasn’t the easiest person to travel with, as his own agenda would often intrude on other tour guests. Besides insisting that the entire bus join him in grace before every meal, regardless of other’s religious convictions, he did himself out one day when the tour group went to an outdoor concert and fireworks display.

Being an elderly man with heart issues, my mother secured a wheelchair for him to be pushed to the viewing area for the concert. It was a long way in, and tough pushing that wheelchair for my parents, but they got grandfather to the specially designated wheelchair platform. In fact, they found themselves in the area which contained the best seats in the house. Upon arrival, my grandfather loudly announced how stiff he was from being “forced” to ride in the wheelchair.

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Grandpa then proceeded to demonstrate to the entire assembly of concert goers his flexibility, as he stood up, and used a safety rail to stretch his legs. Not very handicapped was he. We laugh about it now, but at the time my mother said she could have crawled away and hid under a rock. Relatives, you get what you get. Sometimes our relatives are great people; sometimes they are very interesting, and as already indicated sometimes we'd like to trade them to another family.

Jesus also had a very interesting extended family, not to mention his own immediate family not being without its own controversy. One such relative of Jesus, lived in the hill country of Judea in a small little village. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were a God-fearing couple, whose greatest disappointment in life was that they were unable to conceive any children; particularly any sons to succeed them. As time passed, the expectations of any children coming into their family grew dimmer.

Zechariah was a priest, and according to custom, different groupings of priests would be entrusted with the burning of incense in the "Holies of Holies" in the temple in Jerusalem. Only one man was entrusted to go into the sacred chamber, and by the drawing of lots, Zechariah was chosen for his first, and only trip behind the curtain, as you could only do this task once in your lifetime. While attending the incense, Gabriel the angel appeared to Zechariah, and told him his prayers for a son were about to be answered.

He and Elizabeth were to have a son, and he was to be named John, and he was to be great in the eyes of the Lord, and to have the spirit and power of Elijah. As many of you know, Zechariah did not believe Gabriel because, how shall I put this, because he was long in the tooth, as was Elizabeth. To chastise Zechariah for his unbelief, he was struck dumb or unable to speak until John was born.

Zechariah was so long in the inner sanctum that the crowd of worshippers was getting worried. Perhaps he had done something to offend God and had died. In fact, a rope was always tied to the priest who entered the Holy of Holies, so if he did get struck down, they could pull his body out. But Zechariah did emerge, and yet was unable to speak and the crowd knew immediately that he had had a vision.

As the story unfolds, Elizabeth becomes pregnant and words of her amazing conception spread throughout the area. It becomes the talk of the town. When Elizabeth is about six months along in her pregnancy, Gabriel pops in on Mary and announces that she too would have a miraculous pregnancy, but this time the baby will not just be a prophet, but the Son of the Most High God.

Dear young Mary, who was probably a teenager of about 14 years, is overcome and wonders how this can all come about. Gabriel points out to her that her relative Elizabeth, who everyone is talking about, has become pregnant in her old age and the lesson is that nothing is impossible for God. The story continues with Mary heading off to see Elizabeth to confirm all of this and to see the sign of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Now these stories are well known to many of us.

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These are stories we celebrate year after year: in carols, sermons, and pageants. Virgin births, pregnancy in old age, Zechariah being struck dumb; but what we forget sometimes is that these stories are about Jesus' earthly relatives. They are confined to one family group.

Mary is of course, Jesus' mother and Joseph his earthly father, but Elizabeth and Zechariah are also Jesus' earthly relatives. The actual nature of the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth is not made clear. It could be they were simply from the same kinship group or maybe they were cousins. I don't know why, and I have no evidence to suggest this is correct, but I just seem to want to call Zechariah, Mary's uncle Zeek.

Uncle Zeek was, as I mentioned, a God fearing, simple, average man; certainly not one to cause a commotion. That is until his turn at the temple, when unable to speak; he goes about signaling what he can and scratching out phrases on a writing tablet. Zeek goes from kindly uncle to eccentric celebrity. Maybe we forget that when these events happened, people were more open to the idea of God's miraculous intervention.

I mean, when Zechariah emerges from the inner sanctum, the crowd assumes he has seen a vision. If we had been there, we probably would have assumed, because he was speechless and waving his arms frantically, that maybe he had had a stroke. This was some seriously weird stuff happening in the Judean countryside, and all of it in Jesus' family. But the strangeness doesn't end here.

Eight days after John was born, there was a great gathering of the family for the circumcision ceremony. It was traditionally the time when the son's permanent name was given by the father and announced to the family. Well Zechariah couldn't speak, and the rest of the family was insisting that the new baby be called Zechariah, or as is often rendered in Hebrew "Bar Zechariah" or son of Zechariah.

Elizabeth kept insisting that his name was John, and the family obviously got into some heated discussion about tradition, and no one being named John in the family. The happy celebration could easily denigrate into something less than family bliss. Zechariah calls for a writing tablet and writes that his name is to be John and at that moment, his voice returns, and he immediately begins praising God.

Once again weird things are happening in this family, and such unusual occurrences force the people who witnessed them to begin speculating about the nature of this new boy John. "I wonder what this child will turn out to be. For the hand of the Lord is surely upon him in a special way." Zechariah knew what future lay before John. The angel Gabriel had told him, "He will be great in the eyes of the Lord." "A prophet like Elijah!"

"He will call people to repentance and will lead people back to God." This was more than fatherly pride or parental expectation, after all, the angel said as much. I think we could have all understood if after Zechariah got his voice back, he would have undertaken to brag about the future of his son. "My son is going to be great. He is going to be a prophet, the likes of which we haven't seen since Elijah.

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His name will be known all over Israel. The angel Gabriel even said so.” Jewish parents have somehow picked up the reputation of bragging about their children’s success, but I think parents of every background like everyone to hear about how special their child or grandchild is. I found a great story that shows this quite well. It has to do with the election of the first Jewish woman as Prime Minister of Canada.

The new Prime Minister calls her mother: “Mama, I’ve won the election; you’ve got to come to the swearing-in-ceremony with the Governor General.” The mother replied, “I don’t know, what would I wear?” “Don’t worry, I’ll send you a wonderful dressmaker” the daughter said. “But how will I get there?” “I’ll send a plane for you.” “But it’s such a schlep to the airport.”

“Mama, I’ll send a limousine to take you to the airport.” “And what will I do when I get to Ottawa? “There will be a helicopter waiting. And after the ceremony you’ll come with me to a lovely dinner party.” “But you know I only eat kosher.” I’ll be sure the food is kosher. Just come Mama.” “Okay, okay, if it makes you happy.” The great day comes and Mama, beautifully dressed, is seated between two Supreme Court judges.

She nudges the gentleman on her right and says, “You see that girl, the one being sworn in as Prime Minister with her hand on the bible...her brother’s a doctor!” For some of us, this little story has a ring of truth in it, because some of us have always felt we have remained in someone else’s shadow. Which leads me to make the following observation about Zechariah and the wonderful song of praise he gives, beginning in verse 68 called the “*Benedictus*”.

As I pointed out, no one could fault Zechariah for launching into a song of praise about his newly born son. Instead, he surprises us with a song about someone else’s son, namely Mary’s son yet to be born. Zechariah quotes scripture verses, describing how Jesus is the long-promised Saviour, from the line of David. Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant made between God and Abraham.

This is the highest praise anyone can bestow on anyone, but Zechariah does not give such praise to his long-awaited son. Instead, he says, “And you my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord.” In other words, John is not the Messiah and will be but a messenger calling people to prepare. Here we are eight days after John is born and already his father has put him in his place.

John is not to be the center of attention, even on his day of circumcision. God’s chosen Messiah is the focus of attention no matter what else is going on. Furthermore, and this may be hard for us to hear, John’s purpose in life, his calling, is always to be aligned with Jesus. Can you not see the odd nature of this story? On the day to celebrate his long-awaited son, Zechariah is focused on another and greater son.

The future hope of the family, indeed Israel and the world, lies not with John, but with Jesus. The whole point of John’s existence is intimately wrapped up in Jesus. Only when John aligns himself with Jesus, does his life having any meaning or purpose.

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It's like Zechariah is saying "you see that baby who just got circumcised; well, his cousin is the Messiah". From the very moment of his birth John was pointing to Jesus. Even before he could talk, John was calling people to repentance and to follow Jesus. Is this not an incredible story? I mean, how many of us would allow our children to play second fiddle to someone else, even one who was to be the Messiah?

Let us be honest, despite our children or grandchildren's flaws, they are the best of the best to us. Nowhere is this more evident than at Christmas when indulgent parents shower their precious offspring with gifts. Despite our best efforts to spiritualize Christmas, we know deep down inside that this season's focus is on our children. Retailers know this, and cultivate it by placing Santas in the malls, listening to little voices expressing what they want for Christmas.

Now imagine, your long awaited, precious little one being held in your arms, and then saying, "It's not about you". You, my beloved child, are but part of a greater plan. The world does not revolve around you. Your purpose, your life, is to be carried out in the service not to your own whims, but to the "Mighty Saviour". Jesus is who really matters, despite any miracles that surround our children's birth and life.

It's not about me. It's not about you. It's not about family tradition or expectations. It's not about my children. It's not about our grandchildren. It is always, every day, every hour, and every minute about Jesus. And wherever God may take us, whether it is into the wilderness to eat wild honey and locusts and wear scratchy camel hair, or to the halls of business on Bay Street, it is to be Christ's agenda guiding our path.

And when Christ becomes our life's focus, we discover very quickly that we too, can become part of Jesus': quirky, incredible, loved filled family. Amen.