

Advent Devotional December 19, 2023

Scripture

Luke 1:1-25

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 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. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, 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."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Devotion

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Compared with many other species, newborn humans are remarkably immobile and dependent. While the offspring of giraffes and antelopes, ducks and geese are precocial, meaning they can stand and walk

very soon after they're birthed or hatched, we're born without the capacity to do much besides nurse, cry, and make messes. We may crawl at around nine months and walk at around twelve, but it's several years before we can feed and fend for ourselves. We are, in a word, vulnerable.

It's striking, then, that Luke moves so swiftly from situating his narrative in "the days of King Herod of Judea" (v. 5)—a monarch notorious for having his own wife and three sons murdered because he perceived them as threats to his power—to recounting the promise of the birth of John, a frail and helpless infant born to elderly parents. The good news that Gabriel brings to Zechariah counters the oppressive powers that be, not with a display of strength but with the promise of a vulnerable child.

It seems that children's ability to so radically turn their parents' lives upside down has much to do with their vulnerability. If children were born fully capable and independent, those who love them wouldn't drastically rearrange their lives. We receive and care for them because of, not in spite of, their vulnerability and need.

This is how John the Baptist comes into the world in Luke's Gospel—not initially as a fiery prophet of judgment, but as a weak and helpless child who turns Elizabeth and Zechariah's lives upside down. And so it is with Jesus, who comes to us in his vulnerability to meet us in ours. In this time of Advent, let us wait with open and attentive hearts, listening for the still, small voice of the God revealed in the self-emptying love of Jesus, and let us be transformed by that love.

Prayer

Compassionate God, teach us to be imitators of Jesus, not clinging to status or ambition, but opening ourselves to vulnerable relationships with one another and with you. Amen.