

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
6 December 2009**

*2 Advent: Cant 16; Mal 3:1-4;
Phil 1:3-11; Lk 3:1-6*

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This morning's Canticle is the hymn that Zechariah sings after his son John is born. In Year C of our lectionary we are going to hear the magnificently written and beautifully edited gospel of Luke, but unfortunately we are not going to hear Luke's first chapter read all the way through, so let me recap the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth for those of us whose memories of it may be a little dim.

Zechariah is a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, and it's his turn to go into the sanctuary alone and offer incense. The worshippers are outside the sanctuary. The angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that he and his wife will have a son. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth have never had a child because she was always infertile, and now they are old. We should note here that the only other couple in the entire Bible who become parents even though they are old and the wife has been infertile are Abraham and Sarah, the founding parents of the people of Israel.

Gabriel tells Zechariah that his child will become a great prophet, filled with the Holy Spirit. Zechariah reasonably questions how he could have a child, because he and his wife are old. His question seems to cast doubt on Gabriel's prediction, and so an annoyed Gabriel tells him that he won't be able to speak until the day the child is born. The people outside the sanctuary wonder what's taking Zechariah so long, and when he finally comes out all he can do is make gestures because he can't speak. He goes home to Elizabeth, and soon after she gets pregnant.

Gabriel then moves on to visit Mary, a young unmarried woman who is engaged to Joseph. I know you're more familiar with this part of the story, and we will hear a bit of this part later in Advent. But ever since childhood I've always wondered why Zechariah asks Gabriel an innocent question and gets punished for it, while Mary pretty much asks the same question and she doesn't get punished. When Gabriel says that she will bear a child, even without being married to Joseph, Mary asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Same kind of question as Zechariah's, but for some reason Gabriel doesn't get irritated but explains to her just how she's going to get pregnant. When she hears the explanation, Mary says, "OK, I'm good with that" (or words to that effect).

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, who it turns out is Mary's relative. I always thought this was kind of strange, too, since Mary lives in Nazareth, all the way up in Galilee, and Elizabeth lives in the hill country of Judea, presumably somewhere near Jerusalem where Zechariah's job is. By my map the distance from Nazareth to Jerusalem is about 70 miles, a lot of it through some rough country, and I wouldn't think a poor young woman would just up and take a trip like that after becoming pregnant with the son of God, and then scoot back to Nazareth so that she can make a second trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem when Joseph takes her there to register for the census. By the time of the second trip, Mary is about ready to deliver the baby and not in great shape for a major hike. Perhaps women were tougher back then, but two trips in nine months walking or donkey-riding from Nazareth to Jerusalem sounds a bit strenuous. You can

guess that it was questions like these during my parochial school years that got me sent out of the classroom to stand in the hallway.

So then after Mary leaves the focus returns to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their son is born and there's some discussion about what to name him. Elizabeth says his name is going to be John, but the people around them think that's weird, so they ask Zechariah what he wants to name the boy, and Zechariah writes down, "John." At this point Zechariah can speak again, and this is when he breaks out into the hymn that was our canticle this morning.

Between Zechariah's hymn and today's gospel reading comes Luke's version of the Christmas story, which we all know and love. But there is something very interesting about how today's gospel passage begins. Notice how Luke goes to great lengths to locate the beginning of John's ministry in time, dating it by the reign of the Roman emperor, the term of office of the Roman governor, the reign of three local kings, and the term of office of the high priests of the Temple. This much historical detailing is what you do at the beginning of an important story, not three chapters into it.

Luke is telling us not only that today's gospel passage is the real beginning of his story, and what has come before is kind of a prologue; he also wants to make it clear to us that John's ministry, and later the ministry of Jesus, both take place at a specific time in Roman and Palestinian history, that a cosmopolitan, multinational world ruled by Rome and the known leaders of Rome forms the context for the ministries of John and Jesus, ministries that Luke anticipated would change that world for ever.

Now notice all the shifts once again: Zechariah in the temple in Jerusalem, John preaching in the wilderness; Zechariah and Elizabeth recapitulating the story of Abraham and Sarah and recalling the founding of God's people in a land of tribes and nomads, and then John's ministry being located in a specific time and place in the Roman imperial order; Zechariah's song beginning "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel," in contrast to John's citation from Isaiah that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

These shifts are Luke's way of telling us that we are moving from the Old Testament world of the patriarchs and prophets to the New Testament world of Jesus Christ; from the story of Israel-within-Rome to a story of the entire world; from the idea that God's story is only about the nation of Israel, to the recognition that God's story applies to people everywhere, and that the people of God are all people. There are already hints of this more universal understanding in prophets like Isaiah, but the gospel writers and Paul take these hints from the prophets and make the case that the God of Israel, manifest and incarnate in the personhood of Jesus Christ, has become the God for all humanity.

Now what we Christians have done with this huge shift of understanding has not always been to our credit. Yes, we have spread the universal Christian message throughout the world but not always in ways that served the message well. Instead of just letting the message become evident through our teaching, through our acts of compassion and justice, through our ability to see the face of God in every human face, we have sometimes coupled the Christian message with military power and economic oppression—pretty much negating the message as it was meant to be.

And now we are in another very specific historical time, sensing again that the world order is shifting beneath our feet: in the first year of the first term of President Barack Obama, when Netanyahu is prime minister of the still troubled state of Israel,

when Medvedev and Putin rule in Russia, and Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao rule in China, and Ahmedinejad rules in Iran.

Even though it is clear—or should be—that spreading the message of Christ cannot mean we have to make everyone in the world a Christian (and certainly not by force or economic coercion), we Christians must ask ourselves now more than ever what we can do to bring peace to this shifting world. Now more than ever we must recognize that we live in one interconnected world, and that if we continue to tell God's story, we must find ways to tell it with and through all the stories of the world, all the peoples of the world. We no longer look for the light of God to shine upon a single people to set them free. We look instead for the light of God to help us to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.