

Sandra Stogsdill Brown
Zach and Liz Have a Baby
Luke 1:5-25
December 2, 2018

Two thousand years ago, there lived a couple who had done everything right. They obeyed all the commandments and ate all the right foods. Today, they would be the kind of neighbors who cheerfully pick up your mail and feed your dog and keep an eye on things when you're out of town, give you tomatoes from their garden, and bring over tater tot casserole and Snickerdoodles when there's a death in the family. They would be the ones who give their even-more-elderly neighbors a ride to synagogue, who faithfully volunteer at the local food pantry, drive the speed limit, recycle, and always stop to help when they see someone with a flat tire.

The only problem with this couple is, they were getting on in years, and they still didn't have any children. Two thousand years ago, if a couple didn't have a child, people wondered about you. Children were a blessing from God, and a source of security in old age, so if you didn't have a child, God must be displeased with you for something—but Luke says that Zach and Liz were good people—blameless people. Yet they lived under a cloud of suspicion, especially Liz, because infertility was always the woman's fault.

Now, the priests were divided into 24 groups, and each group served for one week twice a year in the Temple. One of their jobs was to offer incense in the sanctuary, which was done twice each day. There was a list of the names of priests who had never been chosen to enter the sanctuary. The order Zechariah belonged to had about 800 members, so it was probably a good size list. Using this list, they would cast lots to see who would have the honor of going all alone into the sanctuary, burning the incense on the altar and cleaning off the ashes. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and Zechariah's turn finally came.

I wish they'd had surveillance cameras back then, because wouldn't you just love to watch the footage of Zechariah slowly and reverently entering that holy place, excited and awed and grateful to be performing this sacred ritual, after years of watching as other names were drawn and other priests tiptoed in. And wouldn't you just love to see the look on Zach's face as he enters in and finds the angel Gabriel right there by the altar, where the incense is supposed to go. And don't you just wonder what in the world angels look like, because every time somebody sees one, they're scared to death? Are they big, do they glow, do they really have wings and halos?

Even more amazing is the conversation that Zach and Gabriel have. Gabriel announces the most wonderful news this man could possibly hope to hear—"Your prayer has been heard." That outrageous, crazy prayer that somehow God would send a child even though Zach and Liz were old enough that Liz had officially been labeled with that terrible word "barren," meaning, "unproductive, infertile, bleak, and lifeless." If Zechariah could fill out an order form for Good News, this announcement would check off all the boxes. A child for him and Liz, check. Not just a child but a son, check. Joy and gladness, check. A child who will be great in the sight of the Lord, filled with the Holy Spirit, preparing the people for the coming of the Lord, check, check, and check! The best Zach can come up with is: How do I know?

Here's Gabriel, this marvelous, high-ranking angelic being who STANDS, he doesn't bow or kneel, but STANDS, in the presence of God, and he gets to deal with this little country priest who has the nerve to pray for something, and then doubts the messenger who shows up and hands it to him! How do you *know*, Zach? How about this: you won't be able to say a word until your son is born and you name him John. How's that for a sign?

I wish someone would make this into a movie, because it would be so much fun to watch the scene when Zechariah finally emerges from the sanctuary and confronts all the people who have been standing outside praying, waiting for him to emerge, wondering why he's in there so long (not supposed to linger in there). To watch Zechariah try to talk and realize he can't, and watch him try to explain what he's seen by using gestures. Try acting THAT out in a game of Charades.

And now imagine being Elizabeth. Year after year of disappointment, hoping for a child who never comes, watching as all her friends become mothers, and then grandmothers. Year after year of being whispered about by her neighbors. *What's wrong with her*, they wonder. Then one day her husband comes home from yet another business trip to Jerusalem, and the man can't talk, but he's clearly got something on his mind, and it's not just meeting an angel. This is not going to be an immaculate conception. Zach has a job to do. Wonder how THAT played out.

I said, "Rod, how would you approach me if you had met an angel who told you I was going to conceive and bear a son, but you couldn't talk?" Rod said, "Well, I guess I'd just make my usual moves."

All I can say is, there must have been some memorable moments from the time Zach came home until the time when Elizabeth realizes she is finally going to be a mother. When she does, nobody has to tell her, "This can only be from God."

There's another character in the story of Zach and Liz. As Liz nears the end of her second trimester, a young cousin comes to visit. Before he is born, baby John is filled with the Holy Spirit and jumps for joy in the womb at the sound the voice of the messiah's mother. Elizabeth herself is filled with the Holy Spirit and says those famous words to Mary, "Blessed

are you among women!” Before Mary can get a word out, and again, without the benefit of personal visits from angels, Elizabeth KNOWS, thanks to the Holy Spirit.

When the baby is finally born, the whole block shut down for the baby shower to end all baby showers. There’s laughter, and singing, and endless cupcakes and BBQ, and on the 8th day, the neighbors come over to circumcise and name the baby. They assume he’ll be named Zechariah, since what are the odds these two will ever have another baby? No, says Elizabeth, he will be called John. Since this was 2,000 years ago so we won’t be too shocked that they promptly blow her off and start asking the father what HE thinks. Zechariah writes, “His name is John,” and suddenly, he can speak again. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he overflows with prophecy and praise: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.’” He continues, speaking blessing after blessing after blessing. At the end of the day, we can picture the sun setting on the little home of Zach and Liz, the new mother holding her son in her aged hands, cradling him against her face that is graced with crow’s feet, hair streaked with gray cascading around him, and the new father with tears of joy silently rolling down his face, able to speak but with a heart too full for words.

There are many things today’s readers can take from this story, this story that is so much more than just a prelude to the main action. Gabriel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, FOR—your prayer has been heard.” The prayer that Zach and Liz had been praying for years, at first with hope, then out of desperation, then finally out of sheer habit, was HEARD, and answered in a way that surely exceeded their wildest expectations. The message I hear is: wow, what an encouragement to pray, and to pray BIG, as I preached earlier this fall. Expect God to hear you. Expect God to show up. Do not give up. Somehow, this makes a difference.

Even louder is the reminder that one scholar offers, that “the old, the poor, the humble, and the insignificant are not to be overlooked; they are God’s chosen people.” Our culture worships youth—even churches are measured by whether or not young people like them—yet God chose two humble, elderly people to be the parents of the man who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. One of our octogenarians said earlier this week, “The problem is, our church has too many old people.” I said, “No, that’s not a problem. We need all the old people we can get. We need MORE old people. We just need people of other ages, too.” If nothing else the story of Zach and Liz proves that the Holy Spirit can move in our lives at ANY AGE, from babies in the womb to the person who no longer knows what day it is. The Spirit can enter in to those barren, dry, unproductive places in our lives, and bring new life, at ANY AGE. The Spirit can heal our feelings of inadequacy and disgrace, AT ANY AGE. The Spirit can infuse us with visions of God at work in human history and speak through us to the world, AT ANY AGE. And if it’s true for individuals, it’s true for communities, so don’t give up praying for new life in this church, and this community, because at this moment in time, we may skew a little older, BUT—thanks be to God, we have still got some moves. Amen!