

SERMON
“Spiritual Intrusions”
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November 29, 2009
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Luke 1: 5-25

Leader: 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. Both of them were **righteous** before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Pastor: Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified: and fear overwhelmed him.

Leader: 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.**”

Pastor: 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.”

Leader: 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. 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.”

Pastor: Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 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. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Leader: After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “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.

SERMON

This is not the scripture passage the lectionary tells me to use this Sunday. The reading for today should have been Luke 21: 25-36, the most apocalyptic, eschatological section within the gospel of Luke. And Advent is the most apocalyptic, eschatological season of the church year, but I decided against using it because so much damage has been done to this literature genre by our modern world.

I decided instead on the first story in the birth narrative, for it is such a good illustration of a season of apocalyptic (times which involves widespread devastation) and eschatological (end times) occurrences. In other words, of how God intervenes and interrupts our lives to bring to bring things to an end, and spiritually open us to a new reality.

There are righteous people, religious people, spiritual people, their opposites, and a blending there-of. Zechariah stood more in the camp of the righteous, religious type. He was what Luke refers to “as a righteous man”. A righteous person, according to antiquities’ definition, was one who fulfilled the demands of a relationship. Acts of righteousness may be of an ethical nature, but the act is not designated “righteous” because it conforms to some ethical norm, either divine or human. Rather, the act is righteous when it is simply the right and good thing to do in order to preserve the humanity of someone with whom we are in a relationship.

Each of us find ourselves cast in a multitude of relationships: politicians with the people, judges with complainants, pastors with parishioners, spouses with their spouse, parents with their children, children with their parents, neighbor with neighbors, church members with their faith family, communities with the poor, and the list goes on and on. Each of these relationships brings with it specific demands: the fulfillment of which constitutes righteousness. The demands differ from relationship to relationship. Righteousness in one situation may be unrighteousness

in another. When someone, human or divine, fulfills the demands that relationships impose that person is deemed “righteous.” And Luke tells us that Zechariah was a righteous man.

Of the types of people I listed earlier: righteous, religious, spiritual, their opposites and a blending there-of, my hunch is that Zechariah stood in the in the righteous, religious camp. But one thing was missing in his life. He was **no longer** a spiritual man.

You may say, “Now wait a ‘dog on’ minute Becky. How can you say Zechariah was not a spiritual man? He was a priest. Says so right there in the Bible. And if he was a priest, he was a praying man, and a man who went into the sanctuary of the Lord regularly. Was right there in the sanctuary the day old Gabriel show up and nearly scared him out of his wits.”

You are right, he was and did, but that made him a religious man. Not a spiritual one. Often, religion and spirituality get confused. Religion evolves around a system of doctrines, dogmas, and creeds that recognize certain beliefs and behaviors as correct. Religion houses these and protects them. It is often assumed that spirituality has something to do with a prayer life, worship, meditation—and sometimes even candle gazing, incense burning, and mantras. These do have something to do with spirituality in that they are techniques and practices used in one’s spiritual quest, but they are not in and of themselves, what it means to be spiritual.

A spiritual person is spirit filled. When the spirit, which is the breath of God, fills us—we are alive—really alive. There is a song in our hearts, inspiration in our souls, and hope in our hearts—for growing inside of us is the life-giving breath of God. Maybe once Zechariah was a spiritual man, but **that had long ago died**. Zechariah dreamed and prayed for a son. His dreams haunted him for he felt like time and possibility had passed him by. He lost his belief that God could or would intercede in his life.

Zechariah was a man who had the breath of God knocked right out of him—but that’s about to change—for he is about to meet an angel, a messenger of hope.

There is nothing quite like an angel, a messenger of hope, to put a bounce back in your step. Hope fuels us. It jump-starts our hearts. It is the conception stage of spirituality, preparing us for the coming of Christ. It is the advent of Advent that opens us to the possibilities of Christmas. It is the beginning of divine revelation. It is the majesty of joy searching for us in the darkness. It is the reality that in the midst of apocalyptic times, times which involves widespread devastation and lost dreams, God will intercede and bring it to an end, and will bring forth an eschatological occurrence. In other words, it is about how God intervenes and interrupts our lives to bring to an end that which needs to die, and spiritually open us to a new reality of what can be.

Spirituality is the miracle that happens to us. It is not something we do. Religion and righteousness we do. It is very, very good that we do them, for right relationship demands it. Yet, there are times when the best thing we can do is to wait upon God. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest teaching at Piedmont College says, “When we run out of words, then and perhaps only then can God be God. When we have eaten our own words until we’re sick of them, when nothing we can tell ourselves makes a dent in our hunger, when we are prepared to surrender the very words that brought us into being in hope of hearing it spoken again—then, at last we are ready to worship God.” She suggests that maybe after Zechariah discovers he and Elizabeth are going to have a baby, he was not allowed to speak, not as punishment, but as a gift of silence—the silence from which miracles are born. Amen.