

"The Divine Interruption" – Luke 1:5-25 – December 2, 2018

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Today we begin the Season of Advent, and we also start our journey through the gospel of Luke. From his writing style and the language he uses, scholars have determined that the writer of Luke was a learned man. To prepare his readers for the life and ministry of Jesus as an adult, Luke gives us two distinct chapters to begin this gospel. These first two chapters were written in a different style, they have a different feel than the remainder of the gospel, and he does this on purpose. He wants to begin with a sense of mystery and wonder, and he uses scriptural language – that is, language that was found in the Hebrew scriptures. He uses images of visions and angels, he incorporates stories that parallel events from Israel's history, and he sets the stage for what is to come next. With skill, he shows us that, what is about to happen in the person and life of Jesus Christ, is truly a divine interruption into history.

Luke begins the story with an annunciation – a proclamation or announcement. A sign that something was about to happen. The people of Israel had long memories. They remembered the promises of God. They knew the stories of the prophets. They understood longsuffering, waiting and patience. They believed in the One True God. The God who would eventually deliver them from out of the bonds of oppression. The God who brought them out from slavery in Egypt. The God who returned them to Jerusalem following the long Babylonian exile. The God who would send the Anointed One, the Messiah, born of the lineage of the great King David. This Messiah was their hope.

Their reality was that of an occupied people. The borders of Rome stretched to the horizons. To be sure, they had their king – Herod – but he was just a puppet, whose strings were pulled by the Roman authorities. Occasionally a man would rise up, proclaiming redemption, freedom and revolution. Followers would flock to him briefly. But insurrections were not tolerated by the Romans.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were an old, childless couple. They were both descended from priestly line of Aaron and lived in the hill country of Judea. Late in his career as priest, Zechariah's priestly group was on duty at the Temple in Jerusalem. He was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary and offer the incense to the Lord. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

In this holiest of places, anything could happen. And it did. As Zechariah entered the space, he was terrified by the site of a heavenly messenger. The angel Gabriel spoke, attempting to calm his fears and bring to him an amazing announcement from God. His wife would bear a

son to be named John, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will go before the Lord, preparing the people of Israel, turning their hearts, to be made ready for the Lord.

In the moment of receiving this incredible announcement, in this moment of blazing hope, the eyes of the priest were blinded by doubt. A child? A son? I am an old man. Elizabeth is an old woman, well beyond the age for bearing sons. How can this be?

Zechariah was a priest. He knew about Abraham and Sarah, about how God gave them a son, Isaac, in the autumn years of their lifetimes. He knew of how God had brought hope out of barrenness in times past. Yet the priest was struck by a moment of pragmatism. Perhaps even a touch of cynicism. They had tried for years to have children, yet Elizabeth remained barren. How could it be any different? He had accepted the reality of how things were. A son, now? Just a pipe dream.

The fire of hope can often be quenched when we become weighed down by reality.

Instead of hoping for something different, something better, in the day to day living our lives, sometimes we focus on seeing things as they really are. But we color reality by pessimism. How could things get any better? This is reality – the way things are. The way things always will be.

Hope transforms that pessimism. It sees things as they could be. In the midst of the dreary, relentlessness of daily living – the divine breaks through, interrupts, and the spark of hope is made manifest

This son would not only fulfill the hope of an elderly, childless couple but would he would set the stage for the fulfillment of the hope of a people. Preparing the way for the one who was to come. He was to be the ember that would rekindle the flames of Israel's hope.

Gabriel caused Zechariah to become mute due to his doubt. Everyone knew that something had happened. When he returned to the hill country, he could not tell his wife of this joyous announcement. But it didn't take long for her to understand. Soon she found herself to be pregnant.

The writer of Luke immediately tells of a second annunciation, and it is similar in structure to the first. For us, this is perhaps the more familiar story – when the angel Gabriel came to a young woman named Mary and told her that she would give birth to the Son of God and would inherit the throne of his ancestor David.

But let us linger a bit with the first announcement. It is not so strange for a young woman to bear a child. But for an old woman, a woman past her time of bearing children, a woman who had desperately longed to give sons to her beloved husband – she had become resolute to the fact of her barrenness. Like the women before her – Sarah and Hannah – who had also longed for children with their husbands, but were seemingly left without hope. They lived in their silent shame, believing, due to societal stigma, that they had been abandoned by God. But then, the flame of hope was kindled, with the promise of a child. And in each case, the pregnancy of those older women signaled a moment when God broke through into the mortal realm. In these women, hope stirred anew. And their hope was magnified in the stories of Israel, becoming part of their history – God was at work and change was coming.

As we enter into this Season of Advent, let us bathe ourselves in the wonder of annunciation. The word of God has come to us, announcing the promise of life where only barrenness existed. Let us wonder at these stirrings of hope as we enter in to the mystery of God's divine interruption.