

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 6, 2015

Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 5-25

Angels of Advent: Gabriel Appears to Zechariah

Today we begin a series about the Angels of Advent and Christmas.

Today - Gabriel appears to Zechariah to announce the birth of John, Jesus' cousin.

Next week - Gabriel will visit Mary to announce Jesus' birth

The Sunday before Christmas - an unnamed angel visits Joseph

Christmas Eve - the angels visit the shepherds the night that Jesus is born

Jan. 3 - an angel visits Joseph again to help the Holy Family escape Herod's murderous rampage.

First about angels... The angels of the Bible are NOT the same as the angels of popular culture and Baroque and Renaissance art.

While there are only two named angels in the Bible (Michael and Gabriel) - there are nearly 300 references to angels throughout all of Scripture.

In Genesis, God sent an angel to guard the Garden of Eden after He banished Adam and Eve from it. In Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, with which the Israelites carry around the Torah has angels on it. In the book of Daniel - Daniel has a vision and the angel Gabriel helps him to interpret it. In Isaiah, angels praise God.

There are also angels throughout the New Testament Gospels. They tend to Jesus when he is tempted in the desert. They minister to Jesus when he's in the garden of Gethsemane right before he's arrested. They are at the empty tomb on Easter assuring the disciples that Jesus has risen.

But it seems that most of all, angels are part of the Christmas story - and not just the Biblical story but the culture's expression and decorating of the seasons. They're on Christmas cards and posters at the mall. We put them on top of our Christmas trees.

But what about the biblical Christmas story? Angels are absolutely essential to it. And here's where the real definition of angels comes in to play. Angels are: messengers of God.

As messengers, each time they appear, they deliver important news. When God's going to do something big, He dispatches angels.

In our reading for today we have the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was an old man - old and tired. He and his wife Elizabeth had spent their whole life trying to live a good life, but still God's ultimate blessing - a child - eluded them.

Now, Zechariah was a priest. Not an important Jerusalem priest, but an ordinary priest in a small town. Every year it was his duty to go to the temple in Jerusalem to offer incense at a certain time. Which wasn't as glamorous as it sounds.

His duties at the temple were actually pretty boring. While the high profile priests got the glamorous parts, he and hundreds like him did the mundane, day-to-day tasks. He had been doing this for years and I imagine that he was pretty much going through the motions at this point.

So there he is, tending to his ordinary priestly duties, when who should appear? It's Gabriel. And in an instant his life changed!

We might think "that's not so strange - an angel showing up at the temple." But Zechariah was fear struck. Perhaps he had become so bored with his routine that he could not even believe that heaven had broken through to him!

Gabriel had come and since angels are messengers from God, he has something to say - and it is good news! Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son; long after childbearing years, their hearts desire will be granted. They will be parents, and John the Baptist will be their son.

But Zechariah is not so sure.

If only he remembered his Old Testament, he would understand and believe. He would remember that in Genesis angels come to Abraham telling him that he and Sarah will have a son in their old age. And that in Samuel, Hannah is also barren in her old age, and again, God gives her a son as well.

But, Zechariah is not thinking of these stories. When life is empty and full of disappointment, it's hard to get beyond the reality of daily life. And so he asks, "How can this be?"

And so to shock him out of his ordinary world, Gabriel plays a trick on him. If ever we wonder if God has a sense of humor, this story is one that proves that He does. Since Zechariah didn't believe what the angel spoke, he will not be able to speak until his child is born.

Meanwhile, his friends and colleagues are waiting for him to come out from the inner court of the temple, but this year it's taking a little longer than usual. And when he emerges, they can see that something has happened. And all Zechariah can do is mumble and flail with his arms in a frustrating game of charades.

And then I imagine his return home to Elizabeth - knowing she will be pregnant and not being able to speak to her for the entire 9 months!

And then finally, the day comes, and the baby is born. What will his name be? Isn't that the first thing we want to know? In those days in the Jewish tradition, a boy is named for the father. This boy will be named Zechariah of course.

And then Elizabeth says... JOHN! The officials object - there are no "John's" in Zechariah's family. And so they turn to Zechariah, who will no doubt correct his wife and set things right.

He gets a writing tablet and writes... JOHN!

And all of a sudden, he burst into the most eloquent song of praise - his first spoken words after his lifetime of waiting for a son and his 9 months of silence. (The hymn we'll sing at the end of the service is based on this song.)

The story of Zechariah is a total turn around. Gabriel brings hope to this hopeless man. That's what happens when an angel comes to you. They bring good news to those accustomed to bad news.

And Zechariah wasn't the only one accustomed to bad news. All of Israel had been waiting for what seemed to elude them – a savior which was promised for centuries. And they continued in their traditions and customs, perhaps losing their passion somewhere along the way, perhaps asking “is God paying attention to any of this or to us?”

The danger is that when we begin to believe that God has abandoned or at the least ignored us, we can begin to ignore Him, and before long our children don't know Him and His love for them, as we forget what it means to follow Christ.

We're not too unlike Israel. In many ways, God is pushed out, as we put our hope in anything other than Him and Christ – whether it be our careers, our portfolios, our achievements, our image. Placing our hope in these things will in fact leave us without hope when they in turn fail and disappoint us.

These are dark times – week after week, shootings – here and abroad - San Bernardino, Paris, Colorado Springs.

So what does our Advent angel Gabriel, say to us today? The same thing he said 2,000 years ago...

Don't be afraid!
Your prayer has been heard!

When it seems like all hope is lost, God does indeed come. He has NOT abandoned us – just as he hadn't abandoned Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Abraham and Sarah before them, nor all of Israel.

You know how when a child is afraid, sometimes it's not enough to reassure them, “Don't be afraid; you'll be okay.” Because if you ask the question, “Would you like me to stay with you a while?” the answer is always, “YES.” We need someone by our side when we're afraid!

When I was in my twenties and the boy I thought I'd be with forever broke up with me, I was afraid - and so I called my friend Linda who lives on the West Coast (2 hour time difference - I knew she'd be awake!). And then my friend Julie invited me to stay at her place for a couple days; and then my friend Rhonda stayed with me at my place after that. When we're in a scary place we need someone to come and be with us.

Darkness does turn to light. Sadness does turn to joy. Despair does become hope.

Just as light came to darkness in Israel, just as hope came to hopeless Zechariah, it will come to us as well. Perhaps like Zechariah we need to spend some time in silence – listening.

And listen to the song he sings once he speaks – a song of faith and hope!
In the tender mercy of our God, the dawn shall break upon us from on high,
to give light to those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

This is the hope of Advent, spoken to us in these dark days.
Thanks be to God for this glorious Good News and the messenger who delivered it.

Amen.