

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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December 3, 2017
1st Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:5-25

Called to God's Story

Happy new year!

No, the pages of my calendar didn't stick together when I turned the page at the end of November. I indeed turned the page from November to December. But doing that on Friday morning as I did, does not prompt my new year's greeting to you this morning. That's because the new year I'm referring to begins today—not because it's December 3 or December anything, but rather because it is the first Sunday of Advent.

In the annual cycle of life within our Christian tradition, the new year begins 4 Sundays *before* Christmas Day—which this year, is today. While the start of the cycle depends on Christmas—the birth of Jesus—the beginning of the annual observance begins not with the birth, but with the *anticipation* of the *coming* of Jesus.

So while our sanctuary, church grounds and halls have been beautifully decked with boughs of holly, among other beautiful seasonal decor, it's not yet time to celebrate the baby Jesus in the manger. We'll do that 3 weeks from today—or more precisely 3 weeks from this evening. Today, and the days leading up to Christmas, we'll take time to get our bearings, our footing, to find our place in God's story as that story then unfolds in an amazing new way.

The Gospel of Luke is the one of the 4 gospels that gives us the most full and complete look at the event of Jesus' birth, as well at the context of that birth. Luke begins his gospel with these words,

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Lk. 1:1-4)

It's not that Luke is claiming to write a better version of the gospel. It's not that he is claiming to write a more complete version. Rather it is his intention to assemble the various sources of the events of Jesus into an account that places them into the larger storyline of God's people. Luke wants Theophilus, to whom he is addressing this introduction, to find his place in God's story as he tells the story of Jesus.

By the way, there is no information about who this Theophilus is. We really don't know anything about him. Luke adds the words, "most excellent," in front of Theophilus, terms at that time that were reserved for those in the high echelons of Roman society. So while Luke was indeed likely addressing his gospel to a specific person, over the centuries the name has come to be associated with anyone who wants to know the truth about Jesus, since the name itself means "friend of God."

I think I'm safe in saying that all of us here today consider ourselves friends of God. Therefore, as we begin our Advent season with these events in Luke's gospel, we can hear the writer saying to you and to me that this has been written so that we may know the truth concerning the things about which we have been instructed. We're in effect being invited and called to *find ourselves* in God's story.

Zachariah and Elizabeth are then the first two people that enter the narrative. They are 2 of the many faithful Jews at the time. Zechariah is identified as a priest. They are “getting on in years” as Luke puts it, a gentle way of saying that they were among the oldest people in their community. They are also childless. And because of their advanced age, the opportunity for Elizabeth to bear children has now passed by—a condition that has left her with reduced status and dignity.

Right from the get-go, Theophilus who was surely a learned Jew would recognize the situation in which Zechariah and Elizabeth found themselves—namely faithful servants of God and yet childless. This is a storyline feature that occurs in several places in the story of God’s people across the generations. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel among others. Theophilus would be immediately drawn into this part of God’s story because of its similarity to others before it.

So let’s ponder Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s situation. They are a married couple who have devoted themselves to faithful living. Their religious practices and routines would be well established—so well established that they would go about them without putting much extra thought into them. It’s not like they were simply going through the motions. Rather it was so much a part of their lives that it was like breathing. Just as we cannot not breathe for any length of time, Elizabeth and Zechariah could not not practice their faith. It was as steady and sure as their heartbeat or breathing rhythm.

It is into this sacred routine that had been practiced for decades that their lives take a sharp turn one day when Zechariah was taking his turn in the temple. Everything was going just as it always had gone the hundreds of times before. He was quietly offering incense in the inner sanctuary. Everyone else was outside. All of a sudden an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah, which doesn’t just startle him, it terrifies him. Never in all of his life has he ever encountered an angel or other heavenly being. This angelic appearance was something for which Zechariah was completely unprepared.

When the angel starts speaking to him, he is surely all ears as he sought to make sense out of this extraordinary moment. The angel then informs him that his wife Elizabeth will become pregnant and will give birth to a son. This in itself is shocking to Zechariah. But when the angel goes on to describe the name the baby is to take and then what his task and mission will be, Zechariah is flabbergasted to the point of disbelief. “. . . he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.” (Lk. 1:15-16)

It’s at this point that Zechariah has the audacity to express doubt about what the angel of God has said. The response of the angel is to inform him that he will become mute, unable to speak until the baby is born. And Zechariah is indeed dumbstruck, just as the angel declared. Because he cannot speak, he has to find alternative ways to communicate with others about what had happened inside the temple. In particular he had to find a way to tell Elizabeth about his angelic encounter and what was ahead for her.

In this very first opening event in the gospel of Luke, Theophilus and others in the long line of followers of Judaism would be marveling at how this story of the elderly Elizabeth conceiving a child and bearing a son, nine months later, dovetails with the many similar narratives in the Hebrew scriptures. They would be drawn in to the storyline that quickly moves on to the story of Jesus.

Like Elizabeth and Zechariah, we in our day may find ourselves going about our routines of living out our faith with a familiarity that has been honed across our lifetimes. For some that is over multiple

decades. For others it may be a decade or less. We come to worship, we participate in the study and fellowship opportunities of the church. We seek to serve in one or more aspects of the mission of the church. We do this perhaps because it is familiar; it is comfortable; it is routine.

The call of Zechariah and Elizabeth by God to a totally new and amazing chapter in their lives, is a reminder to us in our day that the call from God can come at any time and even at the most unexpected or even awkward time.

This fall we have been focusing on the theme of call—the call we receive from God where we are called to life. Over the last 3 months we have been examining more than a dozen examples of such calls as we find them in scripture. Our Year of Call continues as we look to the winter and spring ahead.

As we move into this new year with this first Sunday of Advent, we're augmenting our focus on call as we take a closer look at those in the story of Jesus' birth, and discover how it is that they were called to God's story as they took part in the coming of Jesus.

Another feature of Advent that makes it a very special time in our life together is that it has a dual focus. On the one hand, Advent takes us back in time to those events that led up to the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago. Advent helps us to look back to remember how it is that God became incarnate in Jesus. Advent also has a future orientation to it in which we are encouraged to look ahead to anticipate how God will continue to work and influence the outcome of the world.

That is, by the way, what Zechariah and Elizabeth were looking for in their day. The people of God at that time were living in a time where there were political and civil challenges that were overwhelming. The land of Israel and Palestine was occupied by the Roman empire. That Roman occupation had all sorts of negative consequences—practicing their faith without it threatening Roman rule; being taxed in unfair and unjust ways that enriched the wealthy and kept the poor in their places, to name just a couple of them.

The people of that time found hope in the promises contained in the Hebrew scriptures that looked to the day when a Messiah from God would come and liberate God's people and elevate them to a more befitting status.

My friends, we today as people of Christian faith also look at the world around us and find so much of it in need of redemption. In spite of the powers of the world around us, our faith calls us to look to the future with hope. For we believe that God who sent Jesus into the world 2000 years ago and thereby altered the storyline, is also calling us into that story in new and surprising ways.

As we engage the Advent season this year, I encourage you to look at the world around you and consider how it is that you're being called to God's story in our day.

The United Church of Christ is a Christian denomination in our country that is similar to our own denomination in many ways. The local Pilgrim United Church of Christ congregation on South Third just east of the Museum of the Rockies is part of that denomination. A few years ago that denomination began a public relations campaign that is still underway. The campaign is summed up in the statement, "God is still speaking." The symbol of the comma was adopted as a way to emphasize that we haven't yet come to the end of the sentence or the end of the story. What may feel like a final period is actually a comma, because God is still speaking

We're being called to God's story today and throughout this special season of the year. The story is not over. I hope you will join me as we enter into that story today and in the days to come.