

CCUM - A cry in the wilderness
6 Dec 2015

As we ready ourselves for the coming of the Prince of Peace, our scripture story today talks of angels and miracles and God's powerful spirit.

In the beginning of Luke, John the Baptist's birth is foretold

5 During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. [This is letting us know that John's parents come from good folks.] 6 They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. 7 They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant. 8 One day Zechariah was offering his priestly service, because he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. 10 [While] the people who gathered to worship were praying outside. 11 An angel from the Lord appeared to him. 12 When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear.

13 The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. 14 He will be **a joy and delight to you**, and many people will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the Lord's eyes... He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. 16 He will [be a holy man and will] bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. 17 He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can this be? My wife and I are old."

19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. 20 Know this: What I have spoken will come true."... 23 When Zechariah completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. 24 Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant.

[I have friends who were together for more than 20 years without children, not for want of trying. Then when she was in her early 40s she became pregnant. They were both shocked and overjoyed. Their lives were radically changed by the birth of their daughter. We imagine how Zechariah and Elizabeth must have felt.]

57 When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. 58 Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her knowing the Lord had shown her great

mercy. 59 On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. Others wanted to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But Elizabeth replied, “No, his name will be John.”

65 All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone talked about what had happened. 66 All who heard about this thought to themselves, “This is a miracle! What then will this child be?” For, indeed, the Lord’s power was with John.

67 John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, as he lifted the child -

68 “Bless the Lord God of Israel

because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house,

70 just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

72 He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and remembered his holy covenant,

73 ...He has granted

74 that we would be [blessed and]

that we could serve him without fear,

75 in holiness and righteousness in God’s eyes,

for as long as we live.

76 You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

77 You will tell God’s people how to be redeemed

through the forgiveness of their sins.

78 Because of our God’s deep compassion,

the dawn from heaven will break upon us,

79 to give light to those who are sitting in darkness

and to guide us on the path of peace.”

Zechariah sang this song with joy. He was one happy man!! Our Advent tradition tells us that Elizabeth and Mary were cousins. Mary spent some time with Elizabeth during her pregnancy. Angels foretell the special lives that will be ahead for their sons John and Jesus. As cousins, these boys must have spent time together. They likely played together and worked together and went to the temple together and learned of God from

all the many things they observed and felt as reflected by their devote parents. We will hear more about Mary and Joseph in the weeks ahead. Now we turn our attention to John, who was just a few months older than Jesus.

Luke 3:1_17 Common English Bible (CEB)

[Setting this all in a time and place, Luke tells us that] In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 John traveled throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. [Luke assures us that] 4 This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet, This ancient message of comfort was sent to the Babylonian exiles saying that God would lead the people back to their homes through the wilderness and out of exile.

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.

5 Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.

The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.

6 All humanity will see God’s salvation.”

If you read a few verses further along in Isaiah, Isaiah insists that “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be weary; they will walk and not be faint.” (40:30_31)

7 So John preached to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, and he said, “8 Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.

10 The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

And he brought a message of justice and mercy that is very reminiscent of his cousin’s ministry and lasting message to us.

11 He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

13 He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect."

14 Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?"

He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

15 The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. 16 John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I am is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

(Pause as readers take their seats)

John is our cry in the wilderness this morning. John is leading us to the ministry of his cousin and our Prince of Peace. And we can use a word of hope and peace. We can use some vision to help us figure out what the next right actions need to be in this troubled world... and in our sometimes troubled lives. Advent is the time of waiting and it's certainly not all sunlight and flowers. We listening for a cry from deep in the wilderness of our own hearts. Aren't we longing for signs of hope in what sometimes feels like a bleak midwinter. Don't we long for wisdom about the next right action or choice on our journey. And isn't it comforting to know we're not alone on this journey. John is preparing the way for Jesus and for a new world. We find ourselves drawn to the images of being led back home and out of exile, of making the path clear – lowering the mountains, filling the valleys, straightening out the crooked places, and smoothing the rough way. No matter when this story is told, there are always people hoping for light in the darkness whether because of some personal grief or difficulty or a larger cultural calamity. So, we wait. We become ready.

Anna Shirley offers a way to look at this time of waiting. She says that,

[we need] to do some basic soul maintenance and then we too will find ourselves visited by the Holy. And the name of that soul maintenance is Peace or Shalom.

Peace, then, isn't a task we pursue out in the world. It's part of our soul's natural movement, it's a search for shalom – [The word shalom actually has several meanings:] wholeness, health, well-being, prosperity and right

relationship with all. When we find that shalom, that sense of well-being eludes us, we realize that there's something missing [within us].

Soul maintenance is about loving ourselves and others, It's about taking time to focus in our concerns of the heart. It's about letting the beauty around us strengthen our spirit and bring us hope.

It's really the same for our hearts, our feelings, and our physical body. We need care and maintenance. My back was designed to hold me up and help me walk. But that design life is sometimes limited. Mine is telling me, it needs to rest more often. I need to stop sitting for hours at a computer. Now, I don't just say, "Oh, well, doing anything about this is just beyond me." No, I don't give up (most of the time) I try to figure out what's wrong and make some adjustments. I strive for Shalom.... for health and well-being.

Pain tells us something is wrong. It's not something we need to compromise around, but something to address. Whether it's physical pain or soul pain - grief or anger or shame or fear or boredom or contempt or restlessness – all these things tell us there are obstacles in our path that are trying to get our attention.. [A cry goes up in our internal wilderness, leading us to look for actions and attitudes that can bring us to] Shalom (wholeness, health, and well-being) Our job is to realize something is hurting and investigate how to solve the problem. (Anna Shirley)

We are not blind and deaf to the pain and suffering all around us, in our families and beyond. Today as we light our Advent candle, we are reminded that peace is what we long for, peace is what we seek, peace is the solution for our soul pain and the world's pain.

As we await the coming of the infant Prince of Peace, our souls are doing some soul maintenance.... they are getting ready. Now if we could only put aside some of the demands and distractions that call to us and dedicate our energy and attention to making our path straight and lining up with the soul. If we can, we just might experience the [balance and wholeness and right relations - the] shalom for which our souls hunger.

During this Advent season, we are Star-gazing, we are watching and listening for signs of what's to come, signs of peace and shalom - of well-being and health, for us, our loved ones, our planet, and other fellow travelers.

There are many prophetic cries in the wilderness. Cries that encourage us to take care. Cries that encourage us to offer help and comfort. Cries that encourage us to trust.

We do experience at least fleeting moments when we hold in our hearts the guiding vision of shalom. We long to be at rest in the world, to know we belong, to trust that all will be well. When we believe in that vision of hope and peace, and do the soul work we need to do, we move more surely along our path which is made straight and clear... with God with us, Emmanuel.

Today, we remember John who has prepared the way for Jesus and for us. During this Advent season, may we do what we can to listen to the voices of wisdom that are calling us to make shalom a reality.

Let us sing together, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Nanette Sawyer -

The cousin of poor little Mary's boy, Zack's boy, John the Baptist, another miracle baby. "...The word of God came to Zack's boy, John, down on the farm. And he went all around the rural areas preaching a dipping in water—a symbol of a changed way of life as the basis for getting things straightened out." (Luke 3:3, The Cotton Patch Gospel, Luke and Acts.)

I love the Cotton Patch Gospel for the way it roots the gospel story in a setting that I understand more intimately than the ancient near east. The story-teller who translated or rendered these gospel stories, Clarence Jordan, once said that many excellent translations "still have left us stranded in some faraway land in the long-distant past....We want to be participants in the faith, not merely spectators." So he retells the stories as though they were taking place in the Southern U. S. in the mid_20th century.

What will this child grow up to be?

"The little fellow grew up and matured in spirit. And he stayed on the farm until he began his public ministry in the South." (Luke 1:80, The Cotton Patch Gospel) And when John began, he sure came on strong, telling people they had to change their lives, turn things around. The Common English Bible puts it this way, saying that John was "calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins." (Luke 3:3, CEB).

Luke says that John was fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy in 40:1_8. It was a message of comfort sent to the Babylonian exiles saying that God would lead the people back to their homes through the wilderness and out of exile. So is John calling us out of exile? Preparing for Jesus to lead us out of exile?

Turn it around

Isaiah calls the people toward a loyal, trusting relationship with God, but points out that, unfortunately, our loyalty is not a perfect loyalty. It's fickle, actually. It dries up like grass and withers like flowers (Isaiah 40:6_8). We despair. We doubt. We forget that God loves us and loves all humanity. Isaiah says, why do you declare, "My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament"? (40:27)

If you read a little further along, you see that Isaiah insists that "those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary." (40:30_31) How can we turn our lives around and trust?