

12-24-2023 Worship Service

Morning prayer – I will include Judy Unruh in my prayer this morning. She's at the NMC Rehab Unit working to maintain and regain strength as a pelvic fracture heals.

O God, on this Christmas Eve morning we come with all kinds of anticipation. Some are excitedly awaiting Christmas gift surprises, some are anticipating the arrival of family or friends. Some are anticipating test results – medical tests or tests at school. Some are wondering, anticipating what the new year will bring. O God, in all of our anticipation, help us to remember that looking forward to the birth of Jesus each year is a ritual of wild hope. We recall the depth of your love for the world that you sent your own Light and Life – in a way that no one could have anticipated. You are the God of surprises! We love you, and we are grateful.

In the circle and cycle of life, we recognize that even as we celebrate birth, death is part of our lives too. We pray this morning for Meribeth, for Cindy, for Russ and Bart and for all who know and love Rannie. Comfort their grief at his loss and spark rich memories of his life. We pray for Steve and Sandy Banman and for Steve's sisters and the extended family as they all are traveling to be together for the holidays and also are making plans to honor and celebrate the lives of both their parents. We pray for safe travels and for meaningful memories to be shared.

We continue to hold Steve in prayer, God as he carries on in the clinical trial he's a part of for cancer treatment. We continue to pray for Judy Goertzen as well as she carries on with chemo. We pray that these treatments will be effective and life-giving. We pray for Judy Unruh as she does painful rehab work. Give relief from the pain, encouragement for the rehab and give comfort as she's not at home over these holidays.

We pray for those whose anticipation manifests as depression or anxiety. Send your love and care to surround those souls with assurance.

O God, we pray for those in Gaza and the West Bank, for Palestinians and Israelis – for all who are suffering under the rubble of war and hate. We pray for Ukrainians and Russians. We pray all who are working to lend aid, to tend wounds, to bring food, water, medical supplies, the necessities for life. May your Spirit of Holiness and Light and Love squeeze through the brokenness. May your Peace that passes understanding slip in under the doors of the rooms where the powerful meet. May justice and righteousness come together in unexpected ways and places around the world – and in our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Thoughts from an old, grateful prophet – Pastor Lois Harder

Luke 1-2

So, after many weeks of hearing from the Hebrew prophets, we've finally come to the culmination of what they've all been talking about, longing for, threatening and promising for those hundreds of years!

This morning we're in the gospel of Luke. When Dr. Luke wrote *his* gospel account he wanted to make sure to write "an orderly account" of what had happened. He acknowledged that many others had already set out to do that but he wanted his to be the MOST orderly! He tells us in the first few verses that he did investigations and studies of the other accounts that had already been written in order to make his the best. Maybe some of you overachievers can relate... Nevertheless, Luke was not an eyewitness to all that had happened with Jesus of Nazareth, of Bethlehem, of Egypt, of Capernaum, of Jerusalem... a LOT happened! And Dr. Luke was writing about it a couple of generations later – which means that we need to try extra hard to read it through the lens he used when he wrote it.

Some people have called the Gospel of Luke "the most beautiful book ever written". And it is a sweet one. Luke was well-known as a physician and a Gentile. Which is great for us because he offers lots of explanations about Jewish traditions and expectations and stuff. It's also great for us because it was super important to Luke that people from non-Jewish backgrounds GOT Jesus! That they understood that Jesus **was** for the Jewish people AND for them! One of Luke's strongest motivations to write about Jesus seems to have been so that ALL people would know that Jesus came from God as God's messenger of Love... for the world. I mean, no wonder it's called the most beautiful book ever written!

Luke included some material from other sources, as I've said, but he also has some stories and ideas that are unique to his way of telling the story. One of those is here, at the beginning as he talks about Zechariah and Elizabeth. Since we've been spending time with the prophets recently, I read this in a new way this time – my attention was drawn to Zechariah and his prophetic song in light of all the other prophets. So I'd like to try telling this familiar story from the more unfamiliar perspective of Zechariah. I've invited him here this morning for a little interview. Ah! Here he comes now...

L: Good morning! And welcome here! (ad lib... so good to have you, thanks for coming all this way...) I confess I'm a little nervous here! Um... Never having met you before, I'm not quite sure how to address you. What should I call you? Like, Your Priestliness, or Zech-the-Prophet, or this is kind of catchy - Zechariah-of-Ab-I-jah...?

Z: (slightly annoyed) No... just Zechariah will be fine. Thanks.

L: OK, just plain Zechariah. I got it. Well, my first question is one that I'm sure you've been asked MANY times, but I'm sure we're all curious... what actually happened to you on that

fateful day as you were performing your priestly duties, burning the incense, saying the prayers...? Can you tell us about that?

Z: Yes, I have been asked that question many times – I'll do my best to recreate the scene. I had been chosen by lot to serve as priest that day. So, of course I was honored and eager to do a good job. I knew I was surrounded and supported by the whole community as they kept up their prayers outside as I went in.

And suddenly, in the midst of my rituals, I noticed that I wasn't alone in there like I was supposed to be! That was important – only the priests could be in there. And there was a person - or the sense of a person...there, with me! And it freaked me out! I mean, it wasn't threatening or anything – it just really startled me!

L: Well, yeah, that's completely understandable! Please... go on.

Z: Well, then I became aware that not only was there a person, there was also some kind of a message. There were words for me to try to hear and take in and try to understand. The first part of the message was comforting... like, a calming sense that I didn't need to be afraid, but I was anyway!

And then came the craziest message you can imagine – something about my prayers being answered and Elizabeth (my wife) was gonna have a baby. And I was gonna name him John... (I mean, John? There was no one by that name in my family!?) And he was gonna bring me lots of joy... and be super faithful to God and lead a lot of people to God... And he'd be a little weird and unusual, but he would absolutely prepare the way and make it so that people would recognize The Messiah that we had all been waiting for!

L: (whispered) WOW... So bizarre. I mean, no offense intended sir – and I've not met your wife, but from what I've read, you were not exactly in the demographic of those who were raising young children...

Z: Tell me about it! I mean, at so many levels I could not absorb the words of that message. First of all, the baby issue was the LAST thing on my radar! That prayer, that hope... that whole struggle was ancient history! I hadn't thought about that for decades! So I thought, "Ha! Nice idea but you're about 30 years too late."

L: Hmm... and what did the angel have to say about that response?

Z: Oh! Well, I didn't actually SAY that out loud (thank goodness!). But when I even just asked a few questions like, "Well... I don't really get this... What do you mean, exactly? I'm kinda old for something like this... and Elizabeth, well... she's definitely past child-bearing age..." Yeah, let's just say at that point I didn't feel quite as comforted anymore.

L: Ahhhhh, so that must have been when you got your trap snapped shut, huh?

Z: You could say that, yeah! And it wasn't just for a day or two – it was for Elizabeth's entire pregnancy and until she gave birth!

L: (low whistle...) that's a long time!

Z: It was. It *was* a really long time. But lemme tell you what happened DURING that time!

L: Oh, yeah! Please... go right ahead!

Z: Well, that angel was biiiiizeeee. He went from me to my wife's young relative, Mary and delivered some gender-reveal news to her too... before she had any reason to think there was a gender to reveal! The angel also went ahead and clued Mary in about Elizabeth and even though Mary did ask a couple of questions about her own situation, she didn't get in trouble! But, it's true that she quickly and very gracefully accepted all of the angel's news and even gave it a welcoming thumbs up!

I was just astonished at the whole scenario. And because my trap had been so tightly snapped shut, I had lots of time to think, and watch...

L: Well, I guess so! Can you tell us some of the things you learned during that time?

Z: One of the things I learned is that if a person who is accustomed to speaking right away CAN'T speak right away there are a whole lot of mean and judgmental comments that just don't get made! And that's a very good thing.

L: Aha! I can see how THAT could be true! What else?

Z: Not being able to talk made me much more watchful and observant. I learned that my wife Elizabeth and her young relative, Mary were both almost immediately much more open and willing to accept mind-blowing news from an angel than I had ever been.

L: Hmm... and how did you feel about that?

Z: Humbled. Very humbled.

L: I can imagine for someone in your position that might have been difficult. Were there other experiences with the women that surprised you?

Z: Mary came to visit me and Elizabeth when they were both unexpectedly pregnant and it was quite amazing to watch those two together. They were each others' supports and confidants. And they seemed to have remarkable spiritual wisdom and grounding – as if they were both just filled with the power of the Holy Spirit!

L: What do you mean? Could you elaborate, please?

Z: I was particularly inspired one day when I heard Mary singing at the top of her lungs as Elizabeth looked on. Young Mary sang a song that was very similar to the song that Hannah of old had sung, when she was giving thanks for her miraculous pregnancy with her son, Samuel. All three women – Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary had an immovable certainty that their children, all three unexpected, had been sent by God to show God’s ways of Love for this world.

It was as if they all understood that their boys would have particularly important – and difficult – messages to bring to the world.

L: Well, if all of their messages were so important, why were they so difficult?

Z: Because they were NOT the messages that the power people, the politicians and the princes and the priests – like me – wanted to hear. In fact, quite the opposite. The messages were all reminders of God’s faithfulness, care and mercy. They were warnings that God, not armies, would bring down the proud and the powerful and lift up the lowly. They were messages of hope that the hungry would be filled and the wealthy would go away empty.

L: That sounds a lot like the words in the song YOU ended up singing after John was born and you got your voice back.

Z: Yes, indeed! My months of silence and of watching and learning from Elizabeth and Mary made me a much more humble priest and a much more bold prophet.

L: So, when you announced your agreement with Elizabeth that your son’s name would be John and you began to talk again, I understand that the FIRST words out of your mouth were praises to God!?

Z: They sure were! I guess I actually created some fear for some of my neighbors who heard me praising God in some pretty wild and crazy ways and they got a little scared about who John would really grow up to be... they were right to be fearful. God had a scary assignment for him.

L: Well... could you tell us a little more about your song?

Z: Oh, sure. As I said earlier I was inspired by Mary’s song, so when John was born this song just sort of spilled out of me! The first part really expresses what I learned during my time of silence – it’s a kind of political commentary, inviting the faithful to reconsider their faith and to remember that God has always been faithful to the covenant for those who trust in *him* and don’t try to take things into their own hands.

In the second verse I’m singing directly to my boy. It’s a vision of what I imagined for him – his God-given task in this world. And that was to prepare the way for The Messiah, to beg people to soften their hearts, to repent, to receive God’s tender mercy, to run out of the darkness and towards The Light, and to walk in the ways of peace. And by the grace of God, it’s exactly what he did.

L: Yes it is. Congratulations, Zechariah, you must be very honored to have been John's father. And we are very honored to have had you with us as our special guest this morning. Thanks for coming to talk with us.

Z: You're welcome, it was my pleasure. And yes, I'll be forever grateful for John's faithful response to God's call. He made way for Mary's son, Jesus, the one who brought The Light.

Offering Prayer – You are the giver of the ultimate gift. The child whose birth we await and proclaim. Bless these gifts that are returned to you, for you are their source. Bless those who have given these gifts of money and bless all of us as we give our gifts of time, talents, energy.

Benediction – Go in joy and in hope on this Christmas Eve. God has spoken... death is broken! Alleluia! Christ is born!