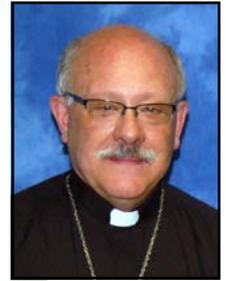




Hear the Word

from Pastor James N. McEachran



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2016

The Angel Speaks to Zechariah's FEAR

Luke 1:5-25

Advent...a new year in the life of the church...a new time to remember the promise of God to a nation, Israel, and the fulfillment we know in the life of Jesus.

Advent...amidst the rush of year end, the time we live in where many fear the new day...the times of life which finds us filled with blessings, yet, times in which we too seek renewal, the meaning of mercy, the experience of forgiveness, and the power to live a reconciled life; life which responds to forgive as we have been forgiven, to love as we have first been loved. To hear again, the story meant just FOR YOU, for us, for all. In times when we might just long too, to hear the angel speak!

And, so we begin with a man whose name was Zechariah---

1. Life is good. Had you asked him, he would have said that life was truly good. After all, he was a priest...we don't hear yet he has traveled from his home in the Judean hill country; nor that he would have served at temple once or twice a year for a week; his background was "the best" and part of a band of priests first named by David the King (8th of 24). And his wife, a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses. No mean couple, these two, "righteous before God, living blamelessly" keeping the commandments and law of the Lord. Perhaps, tired from travel, but excited to light the incense at the altar of the LORD, holiest of holies, honor of honors. What might he have expected? Oh, "But they had no children...Elizabeth was barren...two old crows, "getting on in years." [Lest you forget, to be barren would have been viewed as a disgrace. Far from a blessing with NO offspring!]
2. Serving is frightening. The highest privilege of those set a part to be a priest? To come before the LORD, to meet between the Covenant God and the people. His role? Simply to light incense, an offering to God, a sign of repentant reconnecting to the PROMISE. [A little like a Presiding Minister saying, "The Body of Christ for YOU."]

Ritual becomes renewal. Zechariah did not expect to encounter an angel standing at the right of the sanctuary. I mean talk about a moment in time. Hard to believe what he was about to see, let alone hear! But, wait, not just a minor messenger, but one known as an "archangel," who stands in the presence of God and now stands before Zechariah! What would YOU do? How would YOU feel? For me? It would not be a mild, but major case of FEAR! The Greek is "trembling." Literally, on seeing the angel, "fear fell upon him." Thud!

3. Gabriel speaks. Can you even imagine sight and sound?

“Chill, stop fearing, your prayer is answered, a son is coming, name him ‘John.’ Joy and gladness are yours and others will rejoice too. Great in the Lord’s sight, full of the Spirit. Like Elijah, he will make ‘ready a people prepared for the Lord.’” Talk about a birth announcement!

Over the top, nose filled with incense, ears filled with good news, but he thought, “Can’t wait to tell Elizabeth!”

Wait. Freeze frame. “How will I know this is truth? Ah, er, you must know I am old, so is my wife.”

4. Hurry up and wait. Pretty direct credentialing: Gabriel here; presence of God, “Hello.” Sent to speak just to you with this good news, BUT “You will not speak until this occurs.” Dang! Judgment for distrust? A rebuke, but also time to discern to understand and to be silent before God. Nine very, very long months! But, gift receiving, renewal in faith and life takes time to discern, to trust anew, and to commit to the way of the Lord.

Side Note: The faithful outside waiting to receive the Aaronic Benediction (“The LORD bless you and keep you....”) He could not speak, but they knew had seen a vision yet to be revealed. Nine months, five months, or four weeks we call “Advent.”

5. All will be well. It remained for an older, wise woman, to “get it.” So often the case! Five months in seclusion and Elizabeth said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked with favor on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among the people.” And Zechariah couldn’t say a mumbling word.☺

It is Advent. What do you expect as you come to worship? In these days when the secular world lives between Black Friday and after Christmas sales which likely will begin on December 25th.

Most important stories begin with words like these “it was a dark and stormy night....” Or, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....” Or, “Once upon a time....”

Our narrative of salvation, our good news, is a gospel which transcends every other revelation. As if to say, this story counts and begins “In the days of King Herod of Judea...to a priest named Zechariah” who trembled with fear.

Our world trembles with uncertainty and fear with what we cannot often understand or change; the quick fixes of this or that political, economic, or social upgrade does seem to give answers that alleviate fear or bring a cure for all time.

I believe we often, I often, tremble with fear in the face of the challenges of life which become opportunities to witness and to serve with the earth as an “altar to the Lord.”

Our narrative begins simply enough, but enfolds us in the landscape of grace and forgiveness which leads us to gather, to be encouraged, equipped to be those sent to prepare the way of the Lord each day that God gives us life in the Body of Christ.

Advent is our time to prepare, to repair and to be open to the newness Christ brings. So, two after-thoughts: 1) Might it be there ought to be more silence in Advent, fewer words, less frenzy, fear that we might not prepare well-enough, match the expectations of others or Christmases Past? I recall that over 30 times in the Gospels, Jesus said, “Fear Not.” 2) Then, recall the words “according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord?” “Sanctuary” literally means “Holy Place.” /ton vaon/ The only other place this word occurs is in Luke 23:45 where it says “when the Holy Place curtain was torn from top to bottom.” In Luke 1 the sacrifices occur, but will end with the sacrifice of Jesus. It is now Jesus that stands in the presence of God and intercedes for us. Therefore, he is bold to say, “There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32 Jerusalem Bible)

Today, our Gospel has an angel speak to Zechariah’s FEAR. Next week, “The Angel Speaks to Joseph’s CONFUSION.

In the meantime, we prepare again for the coming the Lord. Even so, Come, Lord Jesus, Come! Amen.