

First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007
Zechariah, Herald of Advent
The Rev. David W. Lovelace

At the time Jesus was born darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the people. Yet, there were believers scattered in every part of the existing nations. These faithful people kept burning bright the light of true faith. God had not been left without witnesses who yearned for the visitation of God in the coming of the promised Messiah. Zechariah and Elizabeth were among those faithful people. Zechariah was a priest in the Temple and Elizabeth the daughter of a priest. Both played a role in the advent of Christ's birth. Listen as Zechariah shares their story.

Enter Zechariah

Childlessness was a curse in our culture, a punishment by God for sin. It was considered by some justifiable cause for a man to divorce his wife and take another.

Elizabeth and I had no children. Was it a curse? We both tried to live faithful lives. I served day after day as a priest in the Temple. Elizabeth grew up around the Temple, the daughter of a priest. We both did our best to walk in the way of the Commandments. We worked hard at being faithful.

Faithful people of our day were not like so many who claim to be faithful in your day. You come to church for an hour once a week and think the rest of your life is immune to your faith. Every day we worked at being faithful.

Divorce, out of the question. We loved each other deeply and never even considered such a thing. But, we had no children. Sometimes at night I would hear Elizabeth weeping quietly. We wanted so much to have a child of our own. I prayed to God for a son and wondered why? Perhaps there are times in your life when you question God.

What made it so difficult was that we did our best to be righteous people. Now we were advanced in years so a child was out of the question.

One day it was my lot to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem. As I went about my duties and amazing thing happened. I could not believe my eyes and

ears. I am getting ahead of myself. I would do well to tell you a bit more about myself and our life.

Elizabeth and I lived in a small town in Judea. It was not far from the city of Jerusalem, what I suppose you would call a suburb. I served the local synagogue as did other priests.

In all the land there were about 20,000 priests. That may sound like a lot to you, but when you consider that the law required the first born son of a family to serve as a priest, it was not so large a number. You could pay a redemption tax, about 14 of your dollars today, and the child did not have to serve. Few could afford the tax. I understand you complain about taxes, you should have lived in our day.

When Herod the great laid siege to Jerusalem he plundered and slaughtered. Elizabeth and I were fortunate to be among those who escaped. Herod proclaimed himself "King of the Jews." He proceeded to milk us dry with taxes: a head tax, a land tax, one fourth of the harvest, crown taxes, import and export taxes, tolls on the roads. We dared not complain. Our land was like a huge prison with secret police. Why Herod himself would disguise himself and walk among us to hear what people were saying about him. Herod grew rich on our sweat and toil. We hated Herod and Rome.

Our people suffered humiliation, poverty and death at the hands of Herod. On top of that we had to pay Temple taxes. All of us had to pay to support the religious system. We were tax poor.

Herod did some good. He built cities, great roadways, palaces, theatres. He had the Temple rebuilt in an attempt to appease the people. Eleven hundred chariots carried the great stones. Ten thousand workmen came to the site every day. He had one thousand priests trained as masons so as not to defile the Holy of Holies. What a sight, all those priests doing manual labor in their fine clothes.

It took ten years but the Temple was better than in Solomon's day. It did not appease the people. We still hated Herod.

The Temple was magnificent. We had 100 doorkeepers just to close the doors at night. We had 7200 priests and 9600 servants assigned to perform the religious rites.

Priests in the country were divided into courses. When our course came due we were required to serve in the Temple. I was serving my course in the Temple when this amazing thing happened. We drew lots each day to see who would enter the Holy of Holies to burn the incense. On that particular day the lot fell to me.

I entered the temple at the appointed time. As people stood outside praying, suddenly an angel appeared. I dropped to my knees in fear. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah," the angel said, "your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will call him John."

He went on, "He will be one of God's great men, filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth. He will turn Israel's children to their God. In the spirit of Elijah, he will make the people ready for their Lord."

I could not believe it. A son, a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. I was dumbfounded. I asked, "How can this be true? I am an old man and Elizabeth is too old to bear a child?"

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God and have been sent to tell you this news. Because you do not believe you will be stuck dumb until the day it happens. Be sure what I have told you comes true."

Dazed, I staggered from the Temple. The others wondered what took me so long and why I would not speak. They surmised I had seen a vision and was overwhelmed.

I returned home when my days at the Temple were over. Elizabeth did become pregnant. She was overjoyed. I do not know if it was over the gift of a child or the fact that I could not talk.

Six months into her pregnancy her cousin Mary visited us. When Mary greeted Elizabeth the unborn child leaped within her. Elizabeth told me that in that moment she knew that the hopes of our people were being fulfilled.

She said to Mary, "It is an honor to have the Mother of our Lord visit in our house."

For three months Mary brought joy to our lives. Shortly after Mary left for home our son was born. The neighbors and relatives all descended upon us to share in our celebration.

On the eighth day we took our son to be circumcised, as is our custom. They were going to name him after me, Zechariah. Elizabeth said, "No, his name is John."

It startled me that Elizabeth knew. How did she know? I had not told her. They beckoned to me and asked what to call the child. I took a tablet and wrote on it "John."

Suddenly I could speak again. I began my prophecy. My joy was so great that I do not recall my exact words. They tell me I said, "This child will be called the Prophet of the most high, he will go before the Lord to prepare his way."

Our friends inquired how I knew this to be true. They did not know what Elizabeth and I knew. He was coming. The Messiah was coming. There was one to go before him and prepare his way. That one was John meaning "a gift from God." That gift was my son.