

"THE STORY OF ELIZABETH AND ZECHARIAH"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York, New York
December 13, 1981.
Part II / Two Part Sermon

"THE STORY OF ELIZABETH AND ZECHARIAH" (Part II)

INTRODUCTION Today's message is the second part of a sermon that grows out of the New Testament story of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Let me begin by filling in a bit of the background for you in the event you weren't with us last Sunday and missed the first part of their story.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were the parents of John the Baptist and John is one of the towering personalities of the Advent Season. John, as you may recall, was the cousin of Jesus. He was a great prophet...told it like it was and was later beheaded by King Herod. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God". "Repent...believe..be baptized" Clean up your act!

Now the parents of John are not that well known. Ask most people who they were and what they did and you'll end up with some blank expression. Their story is told in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. And it's a story that is overshadowed by the story of Mary and Joseph. Yet, there's some solid meaning here and a message for us to take along with us.

RECAPITULATION For one thing, as I tried to bring out last Sunday, their story provides us with an opportunity to say a good word for the ordinary in religion.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were ordinary people...not at all prominent or well-to-do. Quiet, inconspicuous folk...doing ordinary things and yet in the long run far more important than Herod, the King. Zechariah was a priest up in the hills of Judea and along with Elizabeth, he spent his year helping to "galvanize" the very soul of Israel. Faith was their forte, their strength. In a tough and very difficult time, Zechariah did his part to keep the faith of his people alive and powerful and expectant.

Then and always, there were and are the humble, faithful, ordinary folk in whom the strength of the present and the promise of the future rest. Don't ever sell them short. Often they turn out to be the core of society, giving it vision and purpose and integrity. Somehow they bring to mind those words of Teilhard de Chardin,

"The world tomorrow will belong to those who bring the greatest hope to it today...."

AND A GOOD WORD FOR THE ELDERLY Another point I tried to pin down but only barely launched last Sunday was that this story of two elderly folk provides us with the opportunity to say a good word about the elderly.

One thing it reminds us of is that we are never too old to become spiritually pregnant. Zechariah and Elizabeth argued with the angel because they believed that they were too old to create a child. Too many people today continue that argument against the aging. "Too old" is an epithet which becomes an epitaph. We're burying masses of people in America today under the tombstone of age. We deny them a place in our society and in our hearts because they're "too old". I fear that Sidney H. Schanberg in those three articles in the Times these past two weeks entitled, "Trashing Old People" may be closer to the truth and what society is doing than we'd like to admit. And nations are judged by their treatment of the poor and the elderly. How are we doing? But back to Elizabeth and Zechariah.

delightful song that Al Carmines has composed which I heard All sing earlier this week..

They were elderly folk, but not old. They were young of soul. They didn't stand around like sanctified versions of Archie and Edith Bunker, singing, "Those were the days..." Who knows, maybe they went around singing, "I hate the good old days...give me the future", for when it was still dark in Israel, they rose to chant their matins and anticipate the dawn. When those around them were sounding taps, they were out blowing reveille! What a blessing such folk can be.

Dorothea S. Greenbaum, writing in Friday's New York Times, caught my eye with something she wrote that appeared on the Op-Ed page. Entitled, "Elderly, Then Old", this 88 year old woman said:

"There is a difference between being 'old' and being 'elderly'. When you're old, you relinquish the battle to prolong the appearance of you. The days of face-lifting and hair-coloring are over..you don't have to try so hard. You cling to things rather than to people. Things express one's personality and ask nothing in return.

To the young, old and elderly seem much alike. But there is a basic difference: the old have given up; the elderly are still in the race.

The borderline between old and elderly is indistinct. People on both sides occasionally wander across the line. Sensible old people make few plans. Their day to day lives depend on health, unexpected visits from friends, the weather, even favorite television programs. But the elderly have projects: different hair-dos, walks around the block to keep their muscles in shape, plans for travel, and visits to their children and relatives."

She has more to say and I commend it to you, but she closes with this thought:

"For ourselves, we also learn that wisdom doesn't come automatically with the years, like rings in a tree. We can gain a great deal by listening to the young, and thus with light cast out the shadows of old age."

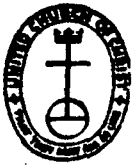
~~Remember, friend, it's not the number of candles on the cake that matters, but rather it's the candlepower of one's faith.~~ Elizabeth and Zechariah were elderly, not old and somehow they remind me of the words of Edward Everett Hale:

"Look up, not down. Look out, not in. Look forward, not back. And always lend a helping hand..."

GOOD WORD FOR THE NON-RATIONAL

OK then. Two down and one to go...for it's a three-point, two part sermon. The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah also provides a preacher with a chance to say a good word for the "non-rational" in religion.

We tend to be rational, reasoned and intellectual in our approach to religion, often leaving little room for the ineffable, the mysterious, the non-rational. To put it mildly, Zechariah ran in to some serendipity in the course of his religious duties that day as he took his turn to offer up the incense in the "holy of holies" in the Temple. He got more than he bargained for, as we saw last Sunday. While in that inner dark, something strange and mysterious took



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"Blessed are they who understand my faltering step and palsied hand. Blessed are they who know that my ears today must strain to catch the things they say. Blessed are they who seem to know my eyes are dim and my wits are slow. Blessed are they who looked away when coffee spilled at table today. Blessed are they with a cheery smile who stop to chat for a little while. Blessed are they who never say, 'You've told that story twice today.' Blessed are they who know the ways to bring back memories from yesterdays. Blessed are they who know I'm at a loss to find the strength to carry the Cross. Blessed are they who ease the days on my journey home in loving ways."

place. Suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name, John. And you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth."

(Luke 1: 13, 14)

When Matthew talks about God communicating directly with men and women, he speaks of dreams. When Luke talks of God communicating directly, he prefers to talk about angels and messengers. Call it what you will - the important thing here is that there was communication - interaction between heaven and earth. A common, ordinary everyday religious occurrence became for Zechariah and his wife, an occasion for an Advent of God's spirit in their lives.

Zechariah came out of that experience with the angel, Gabriel, incapacitated. I wish I had the descriptive gifts to hang that picture on the wall of your mind. A man who was paid for being able to talk and to listen suddenly finds that he can now do neither. Some pedestrian soul who kept the log at the Temple probably made the following entry:

"Incensing priest at morning sacrifice: name, Zechariah. Comment: could not pronounce the final blessing due to loss of voice."

RATIONALISTS RUSH IN Right away the rationalists rush in. They know all about it. Perhaps it was a stroke, they might say. After all, Zechariah was up there in years - 70 plus. Or, perhaps he wasn't really "up" for the big one. After all, this was the chance of a lifetime. Case of nerves. "Butter-flies", Anyway, he goofed. He was so emotionally overcome, he lost his voice. No angel. No Gabriel. It was all in his mind. Psychomatic.

But the common people knew better. For Luke says in verse 22:

"And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he made signs to them and remained dumb."

How did they know? Visions were not that common. But they knew in some way beyond human comprehension, some unaccountable way that soul communicates to soul.

Zechariah could not bless them, yet he gave them the greatest blessing ever. He could not speak a blessing, but he was a blessing. His speechlessness undoubtedly became the talk of that town. Why - shades of Moses coming down from Sinai, wondering how he could ever prove that he had been up there with God. The record says that "the skin of his face shone, and he wist not that it shone".

REFLECTIONS Our deepest spiritual experiences are ineffable - that is, they can't always be put into words. Maybe it was just as well that Zechariah couldn't speak since he couldn't have explained it anyway. It wasn't rational, but mind you - it was real. Very real!

The whole experience turns on prayer and on Zechariah's lingering hope and trust that God would come through. "Ah" some will say, "it was the world view of that day that made them think that God was active in everything..." But no

Less time in Bloomingdales...more time in Church.

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matter the world view, older people just do not propagate children - do they? That de-mythologizing attempt falls short, and is exposed for what it is - fundamental unbelief!

There's a kind of Biblical scholarship that hunts the Bible - to track down every divine intervention, to stomp it out, explain it away. But, friends, "pop" religion as opposed to rational religion has never had much trouble believing that God is among us in power! That He is able to do things...to do the impossible! We keep asking for faith the size of a mountain to move a mustard seed. Those dear folks back there believed. They believed God would keep His word and give them a child. And it happened.

Someone has said, the demons are back! How about angels? How about some divine intervention? I don't believe we've solved all of the secrets of this universe in which we live. Divine intervention...God breaking in and doing His thing. It may not be rational, but mind you - to me it's real! Occasionally the truth comes from the lips of people you least expect, like Archie Bunker. I saw a re-run the other evening...that scene where Mike, his son-in-law, asks, "But Archie, how do you know it was God's voice?" And Archie responds, "Because, Buddy...God has one of them voices that you never forget! You know, like Bing Crosby's". "And God don't make no mistakes" said Archie. "That's how He got to be God".

CLOSING Let me ask in closing, "How many Advents does this make for you?" 20? 30? 40? 60? 70? 80? Perhaps, for you this Season has never quite fulfilled its promise. You go along with it...the carols, the candles, the music, the banners, the angels, the pageants...but it never quite gets through...really through to you.

Let me confess for your comfort - if that's the case - that preaching at Christmas and Easter is some of the hardest preaching I'm called on to do. And it's probably because I must attempt to explain the "ineffable" in ways that are coherent and meaningful with our world view. It's not easy. Maybe we're going at it the wrong way....

There is in Italy today a renewed interest in monastic life among women. In the old days, women came primarily from the country to join a convent. But presently the women who are coming are older, better educated and for the most part - city bred. Recently, one such woman who speaks 8 languages was asked why she had secluded herself in a cloister. She replied, "Because 8 languages are not enough!"

In other words, there is a language of the soul...a wisdom of the heart. As we approach the birthday of the Christ Child, let's listen to the language of the heart. Less words. More wonder. Less work. More waiting. Anyway dear friends....to me... .. It's worth a try for we have nothing to lose. Nothing, but our unbelief.

PRAYER Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then...powerful to heal, to speak, and to save.

Let us think of Him as He is now - powerful as the Spirit of God at work among us...to lift us up out of the low place and to set our feet once again on the high road of life. Draw us, O God, to Him who is the perfect incarnation of Yourself that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of His love. Amen. great love for all people. In the spirit of the Christ child, we pray.

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Elizabeth and Zechariah were the parents of John the Baptist. And John, as you may recall, was the cousin of Jesus. He was a great prophet, the young man who later on was beheaded by King Herod. The parents of John are not that well known. Ask most people who they were and you'll end up with some blank expressions. Their story is told in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, and it's a story that is over-shadowed by the story of Mary and Joseph. Yet, there's some meaning here, and a message for us in these days of Advent .

RECAPITULATION

For one thing, as I mentioned last week, their story does provide us with an opportunity to say a good word for the ordinary in religion.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were ordinary folk, not at all prominent or well-to-do. Quiet, inconspicuous, doing ordinary things, and yet in the long run far more important than Herod, their King. Zechariah was a priest up in the hills. Along with Elizabeth, he spent his years helping to "galvanize" the soul of Israel. Faith was their forte, their strength. In a difficult time, he did his part to keep the faith of people alive and powerful and expectant. Such men and women often turn out to be the sound core of society, giving it integrity and wholesomeness.

Then and always, there were and are the lowly, the faithful, the humble, the ordinary folk in whom the strength of the present and the promise of the future rest. Don't ever sell them short!

Another thing I tried to pin down last Sunday was that this story of an elderly couple provides us with the opportunity to say a good word, too, about the older people. How often we sell them short - wasting their wisdom, overlooking the music and the poetry and the experience they have to give. James Reston....

Elizabeth and Zechariah may have been old of body, but mind you, they were young of soul. They didn't stand around like sanctified versions of Archie and Edith Bunker, singing, "Those Were the Days". When it was still dark in Israel, they rose to chant their matins and anticipate the dawn. When those around them were sounding taps, they were out there blowing reveille. What a blessing such people are!

Remember, friend, it's not the number of candles on the cake that matters, but rather it's the candlepower of one's faith. The elderly. Don't sell them short. So much then in the way of recapitulation.

GOOD WORD FOR THE NON-RATIONAL

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah also provides a preacher with the opportunity to speak a good word for what you call the "non-rational" in religion.

We tend to be rational, reasoned, intellectual in our approach to religion, often leaving little room for the ineffable, the mysterious, the "non-rational".

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REFLECT ON THIS Our deepest spiritual experiences are ineffable. They can't be put into words. Maybe it was just as well that Zechariah couldn't speak since he couldn't have explained it anyway. It wasn't rational, but mind you - it was real. It was very real!

The whole experience turns on prayer and on Zechariah's lingering hope and trust that God would come through. "Ah" we say, "it was the world view of that day that made them think that God was active in everything". But no matter the world view, older people just do not propagate children - do they? That

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In other words, there is a language of the soul. A language of the heart. Less words and more ~~wondering~~ ~~wondering~~. Less work and more waiting. It's worth a try. We have nothing to lose. Nothing, but our unbelief!

SHALL WE PRAY Let us be still, and remember Jesus as he was then, powerful to heal, to speak, and to save.

Let us think of Him as He is now, powerful as the Spirit of God at work among us, to lift us up out of the low places and set our feet once again on the high way. O God, draw us to Him who is the perfect incarnation of thyself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of his love.

Lead us, Lord, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of our Lord's Last Supper. May we see there, plainly and clearly and simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all people everywhere. In the name and spirit of Jesus.