

12/23/18 - Advent 4 - Rev. Seth Jones

Women of the Old Testament: Elizabeth - Welcoming the Welcoming of the Christ

Luke 1:5-58

This morning is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. In many ways, Elizabeth continues the themes we have seen in the Old Testament. Elizabeth is in the tradition of all the women we have spoken of before her. After we printed the bulletin, I thought perhaps a better title would be "*Welcoming the Welcoming of the Christ*" because there is something powerful in welcoming our expectations.

To that end, I want to ask you all to do a thought experiment with me this morning. I want you to imagine you know nothing about the Christian faith. For some of you this will be hard, since you have grown up with the faith or, I hope, you are exceptionally passionate about the faith. I am just asking you to pretend for this morning that you know nothing of the faith.

The reason I ask is because all Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah know is that they believe in God and they believe in the coming of the Messiah. To be a good Jew means to live in constant expectation, and there is great power in waiting, in anticipation, in projecting all our hopes onto the possibilities of the eternal meeting the temporal. And so, let us join Elizabeth where she is in her world and time, her temporal reality.

We hear the beginning of Luke this powerful, rising, sense of the future pressing into the present. A great event has occurred in the Temple with the priest, Zechariah. An angel has appeared to him and told him that his wife, Elizabeth who has been barren, like Sarah, Rachel, and so many others before her, will have a child. *The child, John, will be great before the Lord*, the angel says. The angel doesn't say, *He will also be a little weird, because he will live in the woods and dress in horse hair and eat bugs and honey*. But listen, we have seen and should understand by now that the presence of the Lord makes people a little strange, and this is a beautiful thing. Elizabeth is pregnant with John who is being sent to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

Expectations are so interesting. We make predictions about our futures based on what we know about the past and then assume what has happened will happen again in the future. Some of our expectations are strong predictions based on trend lines from the past that make sense - known knowns. We depend on these expectations to be dependable, like waiting for the bus or the train or the arrival of our mail. Those expectations are fulfilled by what we thought they would be. Until they aren't.

Some expectations are based on what we think will happen because of what we want to happen rather than on what has happened in the past - known unknowns. These are helpful in seeing what we really care about and whether what we care about matches up to the world when the

expectation comes to fruition. For some of the people in Elizabeth's time, the coming of the Messiah is about known unknowns. The way things turn out once the event occurs seems to resonate with what we thought might occur. The past presses into the future and influences the outcomes in a way we can understand and in ways that a person or people have predicted. If they don't happen that way, then we know more about ourselves and what may be going on within our own worldviews.

When we are dealing with the eternal breaking into the world, though, when we await the coming of the Lord with Elizabeth and Zechariah and a little bit later in the story, Mother Mary, our expectations are never what we expect them to be. We are in the realms of the unknown. When I say 'unknown', I don't mean there is nothing we can access about those unknowns. We have echoes, placeholders, and waypoints in the past that direct us forward. But the thing about eternal things and events is we can only expect them based on what we know about temporal things, and it's only once we have an experience of eternal things that we begin to understand that when the eternal things come into contact with the temporal things - no matter what our expectations, our waiting, our hopes may be - the eternal doesn't look like what we thought it would look like. At all.

Later in Luke, this happens with John the Baptist, Elizabeth's son. If anyone knows about known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, it would be the Prophet of the coming of the Messiah. But the eternal presence of God in Jesus Christ makes John the Baptist question what he has perceived and seen. After all, John the Baptist is the one who baptized this Jesus character and presented him to the world as the Messiah. The outcome is not at all what John the Baptist expected. It seems that John the Baptist did not predict he, of all people, would end up in jail in Herod's court. Once there, in some dank and dark and moldy dungeon, in chains, John the Baptist began to wonder, *"Is this how it is now, then? What was I actually doing? What did I actually see? Did I see truly, or did I just see what I want to see?"*

For the Jewish people of Elizabeth's day, a Messiah would have been the person who overthrew the oppression of the Romans, who restored the throne of David and thus the rulership of Israel over and above her neighbors, who would bring the drastic and imminent presence of the Kingdom of the Lord to the world by whatever means necessary. John shared these expectations. He knew he was doing the Lord's work, and many thought that John the Baptist himself might be the Messiah. But John pointed beyond himself to Jesus and proclaimed Jesus the Christ for whom all Israel awaited.

But what did the people get? An argumentative hippie who pulled a bunch of outcasts together and wandered the countryside doing miracles and preaching nonviolence and, worse, criticizing the very people he was supposed to be saving. Jesus did not fulfill the expectations. Sure, Jesus was a known unknown before his ministry, but now that John the Baptist was in jail, it appeared

to him that the unknowns were piling up quickly. So John sent out messengers to question Jesus.

*“Are you really the one sent by God?”*, they ask Jesus. Jesus says to them, and to the crowds following him, *“Well, check it out. People who didn’t hear are hearing again. People who couldn’t see are seeing again. People who couldn’t move are moving, and the sick are getting well. Listen, what are you looking for? What did you expect? Reeds blowing in the wind? Somebody dressed in the formal wear of the your temples and churches? Yet one more prophet? Well, yeah, you got a prophet in John the Baptist, but also so much more. Because John is pretty freakin’ great, and you know what he was telling you? You are too.”*

We should recognize that we project wildly onto our expectations and our waiting of what eternal things do when they connect with the temporal world. We do what the Jewish people did all those years ago. We want Eternal Kings to destroy Temporal governments. We want Eternal powers to destroy temporal actions and actors that interfere with what we think those eternal things should be and the way we think the world should be. We want the Eternal to look like us and act like us, and when it doesn’t, we blame others, or God, for not fulfilling our expectations.

My diversion here is to show that even people who think they are dealing well with their expectations can be overwhelmed by their inability to have their expectations match what is happening. How do we welcome the welcoming of a new thing or person, of a person that perhaps we have hoped for for a very long time? How do we anticipate *‘the way of the Lord’*?

I think we welcome the welcoming of the new by recognizing the eternal does strange things to the temporal world. The entrance of God into the historical, physical, immediate world changes the perception of the world and of God.

Elizabeth gets this. Luke says -after Elizabeth conceived - she hid herself for 5 months. Which is strange because back in the day and age, a woman was defined by the children she had, and so Elizabeth, instead of presenting herself to the world as formerly barren and now bearing a miracle, she hides herself. Wouldn’t you think she would be announcing this from the rooftops as soon as she knew? Elizabeth tells us something important about welcoming the coming of the christ.

*Eternal things, when they prepare to enter into the temporal world, are subtle and hidden to keep us humble.* We therefore are humble before the presence and promise of the eternal. Humility keeps us from projecting our ideas of what the eternal should be and instead allows us to receive the eternal as it is. Humility allows the eternal to bend and shape the temporal and present material world into the high strangeness that affected John the Baptist so much. Elizabeth is humble in the presence of these eternal visitations of angels and babies and Messiahs.

*Eternal things coming into the temporal world don't present themselves in expected ways to keep us curious.* Curiosity is the deep and fundamental characteristic of being a human being in this world and the eternal world. So perhaps another way to read John the Baptist's question "Are you the One who has been sent?" is as a question of curiosity. A child who has just learned to ask "What is that?" and "Why?", is really asking the question out of curiosity, not just to annoy their parents. We can learn a lot from children, and curiosity is at the top of the list. Children thrill and expect the unexpected. Curiosity is the willing acceptance of the unexpected. Elizabeth is curious in the presence of the eternal growing within her and also within her relative, Mary of Nazareth.

*Eternal things entering the temporal world are spectacular in order to keep us filled with awe and wonder.* Awe and wonder are the other side of humility. Spectacle and spectacular share the same root word and both can be equally awe-inspiring. Imagine the spectacle of the bug-eating, horse-hair wearing son of Elizabeth and Zechariah yelling on the banks of the Jordan. Crowds surround him as he calls the Pharisees names and "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1). Then, as if pushed by an invisible force, the crowds all step into the river and wait for John to baptize them. The spectacle has turned into a spectacular movement of the Holy Spirit. The eternal does this, and Elizabeth has already experienced the spectacle of angelic visitations and mute husbands and witnessed those spectacles turn into the spectacular miracle of conceiving new life where none had been possible before.

Elizabeth becomes the channel for the subtle and hidden, the unexpected and the spectacular. She names those eternal things for Mary, when Jesus and John recognize one another from within the womb. Elizabeth says to Mary,

*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Then Elizabeth asks, But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Luke 1:42-43)*

Because you, Elizabeth, are the one who knows what it means to be humble, curious, and awe-struck before the possibilities and expectations of the Lord. With Elizabeth, we gather today on the brink of a story we all think we know really well, but, just for today and tomorrow, pretend we really don't know this story at all. Understand that all we have are expectations. If you choose not to participate in this little thought experiment, then you are choosing the *known knowns* of your past to govern your assumed experience of the eternal in the welcoming of the Christ child. Some of you may struggle with the idea of not knowing about the Messiah at all. Perhaps past creeds or past doctrines or past words from pastors and congregants press themselves into you, so that at least the unknowns of the eternal in your life are managed by the boundaries of theology and peer pressure. And some of you may be willing to trust the example of Elizabeth, and trust the ways of the eternal and give over to the newness that is available in allowing what is unknown about the coming of the Messiah to blossom into unknown realms of possibility for your own future, like a lotus flower opening in a glistening lake.

Because I have to tell you, God wants us to step into this incredible, shimmering future together, humble before the eternal, curious about the unknown, and awe-struck at what the spectacular coming of the Messiah has in store for us. Knowing what Elizabeth knows, why would we ever want to rely on our own expectations regarding the eternal things of God? Let us, like Elizabeth, welcome the welcoming of the Lord with humility, curiosity, and awe and wonder.

Amen.