

The Benedictus Backstory

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Second Sunday in Advent, 9 December 2012

Luke 1: 68-79 (The Song of Zechariah or Benedictus).

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 1: 68-79 (NRSV)

Advent is probably my favourite liturgical season. Partly I think this is because, as you will soon discover, I am a sucker for good stories, including for back stories.

On this second Sunday in Advent, John the Baptist and his transformational message of repentance is a special focus. So this year I thought we might come at John and his message via one of the big back stories which while important, for some reason we don't focus on much, but is one which offers lots of insights and resonates about what this Advent time is all about.

Did you notice our second reading today, the canticle we said in place of the psalm? The Prayer Book called it the Song of Zechariah. So hands up—who really knows who this Zechariah was?

Zechariah was John the Baptist's father, and that second reading was his great prophesy about his own son, John. This prophecy is also often called the *Benedictus* in the West. It is a near perfect summary of all the main themes of Advent.

But it comes at the end of chapter 1 of Luke and concludes Zechariah's interesting story. Chapter 1 of Luke is an Advent treasure trove of wonderful and rightly treasured back stories about angels and visitations and people bursting into prophetic song, all before we hear of Jesus. The wonderful Annunciation story about Mary's visit from the Angel Gabriel is a central scene of Chapter 1. But did you know that in fact Luke devotes more airtime to Zechariah, and that his story frames hers, and is brilliantly interwoven with it at a number of levels? So today I am proposing we dive in and explore his story looking for lessons and pointers.

So let's start. While I hope my description will work self-contained, please feel free to open the bibles in the pews to chapter 1 of Luke to follow the original if you want to. One theme of Advent is beginnings. So it is perhaps worth first noting who walks onto the stage first. In Mark that first person is Jesus, In John's gospel it is John the Baptist, and in Matthew it is Joseph. St Luke chooses to start his story with Zechariah. We hear that he and his wife Elizabeth are decent, respectable and socially important older people. In fact, Zechariah seems

to be Jewish establishment—he serves as an important male priest in the temple in the centre of power and prestige in Jerusalem.

This is already interesting, partly because Mary will soon provide a radical contrast—she is young, female, and miles from the centres of power—in short Zechariah helps to underline just how much Mary is a nobody in the worldly sense.

And yet we told that Zechariah and Elizabeth are childless—barren, in fact. You can't help but think that there is already a symbolic point here: Luke seems to want to start his story of Jesus with a hint that the old temple religion of laws and ceremonies has maybe lost its creative, its generative edge.

Zechariah without any delay gets Luke's gospel off to a very dramatic start. We find him suddenly in the middle of an important service at the temple. It is the hour of incense and he has been chosen as the priest with the particular duty of going into the temple itself, alone, to light the incense over the altar.

While he is in there by himself, with a large crowd and his fellow clergy all waiting outside expectantly for him to emerge, he suddenly finds an angel next to him who starts talking. We are told that he was terrified. In fact Luke underlines this saying he was both terrified and “overcome with fear”. As he might well be when suddenly, and unexpectedly, late in life, this experienced priest, moulded in the ways of the temple, suddenly has a real encounter with God, in a powerful, and incredibly inconvenient, way. He is priest enough to recognise what is happening, but of course has no idea how to deal with it. And there are all those people waiting outside expectantly.

The angel—who is yet to identify himself—then goes on to give the first prophecy in chapter 1 and it is quite a lengthy explanation about John the Baptist and his role. In fact, the angel gives more prophecy time and detail to explaining John to Zechariah than Mary later gets about Jesus. This is perhaps worth hearing in full because it helps explain why John the Baptist features so prominently during Advent: ... the angel said to him,

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Now, having heard all of this, Zechariah seems to object: “I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” The angel then reveals that he is not just any angel, but in fact the great messenger, the archangel Gabriel—and as a priest Zechariah would instantly have taken in the implications—his terror entirely justified. Zechariah then gets struck dumb, unable to speak until, as Gabriel somewhat enigmatically puts it “the day these things take place”. Zechariah then comes out of the temple, into the sun, silent, and everyone in the crowd realises that something profound has happened, but no-one, seemingly even his wife Elizabeth, knows just what. Elizabeth realises she is pregnant only some time later.

Already this is a powerful and remarkable tale with lots to reflect on, don't you think? For example, why did Luke start choose to start Jesus' gospel with this story? Why did the angel Gabriel visit Zechariah, and not his wife Elizabeth? And why did the angel choose the big public ceremony in the sanctuary to visit him? Why did Zechariah get struck dumb? Is this

really a punishment? And why this particular form, of making him unable to speak? I'll come back to some of these later, but you may want to start pondering ...

Now it is only after we have heard this long first Act in Zechariah's story (and its seemingly ominous conclusion at this point) that we suddenly switch to back country Galilee, to a nowhere town called Nazareth to hear the story of Gabriel's second visit, his by comparison very private Annunciation to Mary and their gracious encounter. Mary, the nobody girl who listens, ponders, and then accepts perhaps the most awesome thing any human could be asked to do.

After Mary visits Elizabeth, we get the conclusion to Zechariah's story following the birth John the Baptist. Eight—presumably long—days later, John is finally brought to the temple for his Jewish naming and circumcision ceremony. In a scene of particularly intensely crafted drama we hear that they are about to name him 'Zechariah' after his dad, but then ... thank goodness ... Elizabeth says no, no he is to be called "John". Surprised, the others turn around to check with dad, who with difficulty asks for a writing tablet and with difficulty writes his name down— and yes ... it is ... John. (I know Advent is the Season of Anticipation, but really. :-)) It is only now that Zechariah is finally—after long nine months and eight days after being struck dumb - able to speak. And his very first words are to praise the Lord, and then burst into perhaps the most dense, theologically precise, emotionally nuanced and remarkable prophecy of them all, with the *Benedictus*.

Now, why go into all of this? Well first because I think it shows how very deeply and intimately the coming of Jesus into the world is bound up with John the Baptist's story: John the final and best product of the righteous tradition, the Lord's blessing on its late barrenness; John whose message of repentance is the necessary start and way of preparation for healing and the real truth, who is Jesus.

But just as John is not Jesus, so Zechariah is not Mary. In his interaction with Gabriel you may remember that he responded to his news with a careful question: "How will I know that this is so? I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." That reply has somewhat canny quality in that he seems to be taking care not be directly critical of the prophecy, but rather raising what seems to be a reasonable objection. The very reasonableness makes it almost seem odd that he should be punished. But perhaps his clever older man response is an attempt to try to control the encounter in a way that is just not as up front honest as Mary's reaction to her news, which is probably more impertinent. She just blurted out: "how can this be, since I am a virgin?" Maybe one difference is that old Zechariah did not have young Mary's clarity, or directness, or capacity to say 'yes' to the strange and scary message of REAL truth visiting his soul.

While this may help explain why he was struck dumb, another explanation is that this might have been what he needed. Maybe shutting up for nine months was what this elderly priest, with his worldly success and status, moulded to particular ways of understanding God by years of temple life, needed in order to shift and to grow. A time, late in his life, when he no longer could act, but when he had time to listen deeply, a time to ponder the meaning of his encounter with the angel there in the sanctuary and the incense, a time to ponder the nature of salvation. Maybe that is what happens to all of us when we recognise the Truth at some level of our being, but find we can't properly respond to that Truth—we maybe all kind of get struck dumb for a while? Grace often works in very mysterious ways. Real encounters with the living God can be powerful and not always easy things, and at the time they might even seem to be disempowering and unfair. And you never know when they might happen to you or what form they might take ...

The Greek word for repentance—*metanoia*—literally means transformation of the mind. Transformation is not always easy or incremental. The work of healing a soul, particularly a complex, old and stuck-in-a-rut soul, perhaps sometimes requires deep interventions. [As our gradual hymn put it, the healing word of God can be spoken in many ways and in many modes as circumstances requires.]

What we can say, though, is that his period of enforced silence does not seem to have done Zechariah any harm, and the wait was worth it for us, as the *Benedictus* would have to be one of the most beautiful poems of hope that exists. It is theologically rich as befits a man who had been a priest all his life, but had been forced to think and wrestle. For us, when things happen, maybe we should ponder as he did and maybe our moment may come unexpectedly, like it did for Zechariah on that strange afternoon in the temple.

As an interesting post-script to St Luke's tale, I also recently discovered that Zechariah had one other role that would have made him a saint for the early church—and one that is also relevant to stories of beginnings for our religion : he may well have first Christian martyr. An important text for early Christians, with lots more Mary background—normally known in the West as the Proto-evangelium of James (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf08.vii.iv.html> (paragraphs 23 and 24)), tells of how when Herod came to kill the children his first thought was (perhaps naturally) of Zechariah's son John, who had already been sent away. When Zechariah did not reveal his whereabouts Zechariah was murdered in the temple itself by Herod's men, at daybreak and later his clotted blood on the floor revealed to the priests what had happened. And this then led to Simeon (of *Nunc Dimittis* fame) being appointed to replace him, because he had been told that he would die before he saw the Lord. Interesting, no?

I don't know about you, but though I have heard many of these stories over and again I find I am still finding fresh new insights in them. My sense of expectation for something remarkable and unexpected from this Season is if anything deepening. And I am also finding that I really like that slightly austere edge to this Season, perhaps because its encouragement for us to quieten down and turn our minds to John the Baptist's message to make a real resolution for change is so at odds with what December—a.k.a. the Silly Season—means to the rest of the culture in which we live including what it thinks the lead up to Christmas is about. It really is a Silly Season out there with, to quote John Main, its “worship of the instantly visible and the immediately possessed”, and sadly, “being left finally only with the dryness of the instantly forgotten.”

With all that as background let me finish by reading out again, the second part of the *Benedictus*, in the hope that you may hear some new resonances, and because, as I have said, for me they sum up so much of the underlying themes of Advent—this time of new beginnings, and anticipation before the dawn.

The first part of it is a song of thanksgiving that God's longstanding promises are about to be fulfilled, and that Israel will be delivered from its misery. It is such a wonderful song of hope. But the second part is in large part, well, a tender and loving benediction directed towards his new baby son. I like to imagine him cradling his new baby son John in his arms, and looking at him, as he speaks this wonderful poem whose profundity was perhaps born out of that long time of deep silence:

And you, (my) child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Amen