

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
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Series: Do Not Fear

Sermon: Zachariah and the selfish ask

Luke 1:5-22

During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zachariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

It so happened that as Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense. The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. Zachariah was paralyzed in fear.

But the angel reassured him, “Don’t fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You’re going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He’ll achieve great stature with God.

“He’ll drink neither wine nor beer. He’ll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother’s womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God’s arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he’ll get the people ready for God.”

Zachariah said to the angel, “Do you expect me to believe this? I’m an old man and my wife is an old woman.”

But the angel said, “I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won’t believe me, you’ll be unable to say a word until the day of your son’s birth. Every word I’ve spoken to you will come true on time—God’s time.”

Meanwhile, the congregation waiting for Zachariah was getting restless, wondering what was keeping him so long in the sanctuary. When he came out and couldn’t speak, they knew he had seen a vision. He continued speechless and had to use sign language with the people.

Sermon

In this Advent sermon series, I looked at the Christmas stories as found in the Books of Luke and Matthew. There are four Gospels, stories about the life of Jesus, but only two of them have anything to do with his birth. And they’re both different. I encourage you to read them sometime this Advent. If you read it, you will find four instances where angels come down with specific information, a message from God. Gabriel is the one who gets to do this. And every time, he begins his message with “Do not be afraid.” Now, you can say that when you get an apparition like an angel who shows up out of the blue, you’re going to be afraid. Your pacemaker better be working! It’ll surprise you, for sure. But all the other times in the Bible where angels appear, they don’t say, Don’t be afraid. I’m not convinced that the angel is saying “Don’t be afraid” because of their sudden appearance, but I believe that they are saying, Fear not, because of the fear that was already present, before the angel appeared. Every one of these people had something on their hearts and minds that were weighing them down. So for the next four weeks, we will look at the angel’s message to four prominent people in our

Christmas story and we will see what they were afraid of. And maybe, just maybe, the Angel's message will ring true in our ears as well.

Our first story is actually foretelling the birth of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. John was going to be six months older than Jesus. Mary, Jesus's mother, newly pregnant, would visit Elizabeth who was 6 month's pregnant. John would be the one who would baptize Jesus and it is there that Jesus would begin his ministry. To be fair, this story isn't really a part of the Christmas story, but it is the precursor for the events to come. Zechariah was a priest. And one of the priest's jobs was to burn the incense on the alter. It symbolized Israel's atonement for their sins. At that moment, the priest's only job was to pray for God's forgivingness on the nation. His wife Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron. Aaron was Moses' brother a thousand years before, the beginning of the priestly folk, the first guy to be a priest. It was a proud heritage. A wonderful lineage. Well, the time came to burn the incense on the alter. This happened every day before the morning sacrifice and evening sacrifice. But only one priest would get to go into the Most High Place. It was an alter that was never seen by regular folk, and only rarely by the priestly folk. So who got to burn the incense? That was chosen by random. The priests were in divisions throughout the land, and Zechariah's division was chosen at this time, so they all traveled up to Jerusalem. And at the time for the burning, they cast lots. Think of "Enie, Menie, Minie, Moe." And it happened to fall to Zechariah. This might well be his only chance ever to go into the Most High Place - ever. And he was to pray for the nation. As read to you this morning, the angel Gabriel appeared while he was doing his duty. And the Angel told him "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard."

Stop. What was Zechariah's job? What was the one thing he was sent in there to do? Pray for the people. Pray for the nation. That's it. The angel showed up and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard." Was it the prayer for the nation? Was it the prayer for the people? No! It was the prayer for a son! I believe that Zechariah was scared, not because an angel appeared out of the blue, but because he was just busted for praying for himself! "Pray for nation, pray for people, and by the way, in closing, if it isn't too much trouble, I'd like a child." POOF! Angel! I'd be scared if you put a improper plea in for yourself and you get an answer back right away! Hey, this faith stuff is real! The angel tells Zechariah that he will get a boy, in his old age, and he will help lead the people back to God. And apparently Zechariah didn't read his Old Testament. He questions the angel. "How is this going to be? I'm old. My wife's old. You gotta be kidding me." I've never known an angel to lie. When an angel tells you something, believe it. This angel doesn't mess around. And Zechariah was mute until the day the kid was born! Wives, how would you like it if your husband was mute for nine months! John was born and he grew up in favor with God and would lead people back to God. But what I want to talk about this morning is what made Zechariah afraid. He was being selfish. He was thinking about himself and then got busted. But he also got his wish.

Is it OK to be selfish? Is it ever alright to want what you want? Most of the time, you hear sermons about not being selfish. At Christmas time, we teach others that it is better to give than it is to receive. We want our kids to grow up thinking about others. And it is almost a sin, you would think, to think about yourself. But this morning, at the beginning of this countdown to Christmas, I want to tell you that it is OK to be selfish. It is alright to think about what you want. Taking care of yourself is not sinful. Loving yourself more than others is wrong, but we have it in our heads that we should never ever ever think about ourselves. This morning, I want to take a look at three ways to justify when selfishness is alright.

First, if you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of others. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of others. You're on plane and they tell you, if the oxygen masks drop, put yours on first before you help others. You can't help others if you can't breathe. How many of us could be a better parent or spouse if we had just a little bit of time to ourselves? A little bit of R and R. A little bit of respite? If I'm with my family 100% of the time, the family that I love, after a while, they wouldn't want me around! I'd be drained. I'd be cranky. I'd be empty. I've got a good friend who is on every civic board you can imagine. Every other night he's at another meeting or fund-raising, or event. All good stuff, but after a year of it, he was burned out.

He still went to the meetings, but he wasn't good to them anymore, he was way too committed. And he felt like he should be committed - take that how you want it. If I gave away everything I had, I'd have nothing left, wouldn't I! Deep down, I have this feeling that being selfish is wrong. But if I wasn't a little bit selfish, I'd have nothing left to give.

Secondly, selfishness isn't bad if it doesn't do any harm to others. This is the hardest litmus test to pass. Does your selfishness hurt or harm anyone else? If I cut you off on 213, yeah, my selfishness took something away from you. Some of you know my affinity for soda pop. I remember as a youth, going to the fridge over the holidays when we'd have people come over, and taking out a few cans and hiding them in different places. When we'd run out in the fridge, I would still have my stash. Evil, yes I know. Selfishness that hurts those around us, in any way, is wrong. If you have a thousand rolls of toilet paper and you know your neighbor has none, and Fred Meyers is out because of you...well....But there are ways of being selfish that doesn't hurt anybody. Zachariah knew he was being selfish for asking for a child. But whose it going to hurt? Nobody! Do you want a night to sit in front of a fire and have hot cocoa in your favorite bunny slippers and robe? Do it, if it doesn't hurt anybody! You want to take the afternoon off and skip raking one day? Do it! Your leaves aren't going anywhere! And if they do blow away, bonus! It's OK to be selfish if it doesn't hurt anybody.

Lastly, I firmly believe that you should not give if your giving doesn't allow others to grow. I think you should be selfish if your giving is doing more harm than good. Sometimes I think we give way too much. If your giving is enabling laziness, be a little selfish and not give as much. A young grandmother I know feels like she is being used by her daughter who drops off her grandchild without any notice for the afternoon. She loves spending time with her granddaughter, but is tired of the 2-3 times a week surprise visits. She's a giver, but it's getting old and she doesn't know how to make it stop. Her daughter isn't even running errands, just goes back home to do whatever. A dad lets his grown-up son stay in the basement. Can't keep a job because of his drug addiction. The dad, because of his love and giving, is enabling the son to keep up his lifestyle without needing to change. Not healthy. A wife keeps buying alcohol for her husband, not knowing how to stop the cycle. Someone who lends money to the gambling addict so she doesn't get tossed out in the street. Is your giving enabling someone not to grow? Be selfish!

In the end, we know of course that God did not make us to be selfish people. He made us to learn and to laugh, to love and to cherish. To have friends and family and to be a part of his loving creation. We are called to be a giving people. But we give so much more when we take care of ourselves, when we don't harm others, and when we allow people to grow and prosper on their own. God wants us to be happy. Don't be afraid to be a little selfish. He granted Zachariah's wish, and the baby John would grow into a wonderful leader. May all of your wishes be so noble, may your desires be pure, and may some of your selfish dreams come true. Amen.

Opening:

Good morning and happy Advent to all of you, Oregon City UMC and friends! Week 38 of our online worship. Advent - the time of waiting before the child comes at Christmas. Four Sundays until Christmas, 26 more days, if you're counting. We don't like to wait. Waiting stinks. But Advent teaches us that we have to wait. Wait for Christmas, wait for celebration. Our current national mood is about waiting. We have to wait to go out to eat. We have to wait to go to the gym. We have to wait to see loved ones. There is a reason that patience is a fruit of the spirit, it doesn't come naturally. In the Bible, the word patience and endurance are interchangeable in the original languages. Patience is passive, but Endurance shows vitality in the waiting. So as we wait, we do so with endurance, living through these days awaiting the joys of tomorrow. And if you were waiting on the announcements, you're in luck - the waiting is over!

Children's Time:

Hey kiddos! It is Thanksgiving weekend, but for us, we are beginning our count-down to Christmas. We call the four Sunday's before Christmas Advent, which means waiting, or coming, as in "Something is coming." For these four weeks of Advent, we are going to look at something called a Nativity. Any idea what a nativity is? A nativity is a display that shows the birth of Jesus. These displays began almost 800 years ago, Saint Francis of Assisi, a famous monk, is credited with creating the very first nativity scene in Italy. He put it in a cave, or grotto, and was cast by real humans and live animals. These became popular throughout Europe, and within 100 years, it was almost expected that every church have one, and statues or figurines became the norm.

One tradition in England involved baking a mince pie in the shape of a manger which would hold the Christ child until dinnertime, when the pie was eaten. When the Puritans (think Thanksgiving people), banned Christmas celebrations in the 17th century, they also passed specific legislation to outlaw such pies, calling them "Idolaterie in crust". Luckily, we celebrate Christmas today, and we use the nativity, this manger scene as a way to remember who was there that first Christmas.

Our manger is empty today, but next week, we'll bring in our first cast member - you'll hear about her next week. But if anything, maybe the empty manger reminds us to prepare him room. There is room here, is there room in your life, in your heart for Jesus? Joy to the World, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king, and every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing. We're waiting for Christmas, and in the waiting, we're preparing him room. Thanks for stopping by today!

Offertory:

We are the work of God's hands, the psalmist says, and God continues to shape us each day into a people of goodness and peace. That is why we bring gifts this morning: to be part of creating a more beautiful world through the ministry of this church and the witness of our lives each day. Let us gather our gifts together and present them as an offering to God.

Pastoral Prayer:

Father, I want this holiday season to be filled with light instead of darkness. This is the year of masks. We wear them to protect ourselves and others. But beyond the physical mask, we also hide behind emotional masks. We mask our real selves. We mask our fears. We mask our true desires. How many of us mask away our true hopes, our true dreams. Our truest identity. So in this Advent Season, God of all, please help us discard our emotional masks and be real before You as well as my family and friends. Father in heaven, help me make this holiday season an offering of praise to You. You didn't hide behind a mask, but you sent your Son, in the fullness of humanity and deity, for the world to see, if we have but the eyes to notice. In his grace we offer up our prayers together...

Closing:

Let us close with this line from O Come, O Come Emmanuel:

O Come, O come, Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lowly exile here, until the Son of God Appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmuanl shall come to thee, O Israel! Go in peace!