

“A Voice in the Noise”
Luke 1:67-79/Various Old Testament Readings
December 6, 2009 (Second Sunday of Advent)/FPC
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Old Testament Readings

Read various OT texts referenced by Luke 1:67-79, “Zachariah’s Hymn of Praise:” Psalms 18:1-3, 132: 17-18, 106: 6, 8, 10, 45; Genesis 22:17-18; Malachi 3:1, 4:4; Isaiah 9:2, 60:1-3.

II. Monologue (Dress in costume)

I am a priest....a priest in the temple. I come from a family of priests. We trace our family line back to the first priest Aaron. I have always been a priest. My wife, Elizabeth, also comes from a family of priests. My name is Zachariah.

My story begins when I was serving in the temple. I serve for two weeks a year. I look forward to those two weeks.....serving the holiness of God in the grandeur and beauty of the temple. For 50 weeks I “scratch out a living” and try to make “ends meet” on a simple farm in the hills outside Jerusalem. But for two weeks.....awe, for two weeks it’s different; holiness, wonder and listening.....listening for God.

By lot I was chosen to enter the holy place in the temple, and offer incense with my prayers and the prayers of the people. I was alone in that sacred place.....incense ascending with the prayers to God. It was then that I saw a shape.....a form.....I’ll go ahead and say it; an angel. The angel stood beside the altar, amidst the cloud of incense.....and spoke to me. I was terrified. It was like the veil between this world and the holy place of God’s throne was lifted, and I saw a thing of wonder.....something real, but not of our experience.

The angel then spoke. I heard a voice.....a type of voice I had never heard before. The angel said, “I am Gabriel, the one who stands in the presence of the holy God.” I listened, but could not speak. He said, “Your prayers have been heard. Your wife will have a son, and you will call him ‘John.’ He will be special.....he will be like the great prophet Elijah.....people will be drawn to him.....and afraid of him. He will turn people to God. He will prepare them for the coming of the Messiah.”

Now I tell you, for years I had prayed for a son. Elizabeth and I are good people.....faithful people. But by then we were also old people. The birth of a child.....a son.....it did not seem possible. And so I forgot my place.....I raised my doubts.....I questioned the messenger and the message. I was foolish, and faithless.

This mysterious messenger in the smoke of the incense was not amused. His response was sharp. "I stand before the throne of the holy God," he said. "I come to bring you this good news. And you doubt that this can come to pass? Until all this comes to pass, you shall be mute. You will be unable to speak."

The shape.....the messenger was then gone. I stumbled out of the holy place. The people there were waiting for the blessing I was to announce.....a blessing from God.....a blessing that God had heard their prayers. But I could not speak.....I could not give the blessing. I thought clear thoughts.....but I could not say them. I stood there dumb.....smelling of incense and holiness. And the people there knew something had happened..... something as I stood in the holy place.....something as I stood before God.

There was the 'buzz' of expectation in the temple that day.....and the days that followed. After my two weeks of service were over I went home. And my wife became pregnant. Elizabeth the barren one was going to have a child. She was so happy....and a little frightened. I still could not speak to tell her what happened. But she believed this was of God. And so we waited.....waited to see what would happen....waited on this child.....waited on God. And I waited thinking, remembering, wondering, praying.....but it was waiting without talking.

The nine months went by....and I was silent. But the silence enforced a discipline to read...to think.....to pray.....to hope.....to listen. And the people in our community, friends and strangers, put together my silence with the coming of our child. As the day of birth approached, so did the excitement and anticipation. If the whole thing was of God, what might his birth bring? I thought of the messenger's words. I was drawn to the scriptures in Psalms and Isaiah; words of God's coming salvation, promises of a Savior, forgiveness for sins, the breaking of a new day into the darkness, the coming of peace. Could it be true? And my son was to prepare the way for this salvation of God.....this Savior of God.

Well, the day did come. Our boy was born. People gathered to celebrate, and gathered to see if anything might happen.....perhaps something of God. On the eighth day we gathered for the circumcision, and to name our son. We named him John. There had been the miracle of the messenger in the Temple and my silence. There had been the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy, and the birth of John. And now there was a third miracle; with a great burst of praise I could speak again. It was like a cork had been pulled out of a bottle; words of praise, laughter, prayer and joy all just burst out after nine months of silence. And do you know what it was? It was the blessing that I could not speak at the temple.

When our neighbors saw that I could talk again, they whispered to each other, “This whole thing must be of God. What will become of this little boy named John?” They whispered because they were afraid to believe. After nine months of reading, praying, waiting, listening and hoping.....I was ready to do more than whisper. The ancient texts from Psalms and Isaiah had settled in my heart.....words of God’s salvation....promises of God’s faithfulness and power.....promises of a Savior. And so I sang. I sang a song of praise to God. It was a hymn of salvation. At that moment I saw clearly what God was doing.....and what God was going to do. I sang of my son. I sang of the coming Savior. I sang of God’s grace and power. I was one voice, a different voice, in all the noise of the vast Roman Empire.

III. Text: Read Luke 1:67-79.

IV. Reflection

One voice in the cacophony of noise.....it’s amazing how that one voice can be heard. I remember years ago now, playing high school basketball. Our gym would be filled with noise. There was the noise of squeaky shoes and a bouncing ball. There was the noise of the crowd and the cheerleaders. There was the noise of the band, the whistle of the referees, and our coach barking out defenses and offensive plays. During basketball games our gym was a noisy place. But there was one voice I heard amidst all the noise.....one shout above all the cheers, all the boos, all the music and all the whistles. The one voice I heard was the voice of my dad, shouting “Get the rebound.” One voice in a gym full of noise.....and I could hear it. In fact, I can still hear it after all the noise of over 30 years.....”Get the rebound.”

One voice.....I think Zachariah’s hymn of praise is like that; one voice amidst all the noise of the vast Roman Empire.....one voice amidst all the hopes of the Jewish people for a Savior.....one voice in the daily struggle for life in that little village in the hill country.....one voice over the noise of 2000 years that we hear today. Zachariah’s hymn of praise after nine months of silence is one voice about the coming salvation of God.....the coming of a new day.....the coming of reconciliation and peace.....the blessing of God for all people. It’s an amazing thing that anyone heard the voice, but some did, and believed. That seems to be the way of God often; one voice, a few hear and believe, and amazing things quietly happen.

One voice.....I think the message of Christmas is like that. It’s a noisy time now. There’s the noise of “Christmas ‘to do’ lists,” and Christmas cards. There’s the noise of decorations and cookies and special Christmas sales in every store. There’s the noise of family coming, Christmas parties, and Christmas programs. There’s even the noise

of Christmas planning here; special worship services, special music, candles, communion, a nativity play. It's all beautiful.....but sometimes exhausting.

I think if we're honest we understand Charlie Brown's question to his friend Linus in A Charlie Brown Christmas. In all the noise and chaos of Christmas Charlie Brown confesses, "I guess I don't really understand what Christmas is all about. Can anyone tell me what the true meaning of Christmas is?" It's then that all grows quiet, and there's one voice, the voice of Linus, who says, "I can. I can tell you what Christmas is all about." And with that one voice amidst all the Christmas noise Linus tells.....the Christmas story: "And there were in the country shepherds keeping watch over their flocks.....and the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and the angel said to them: 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of a great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, an on earth peace, good will toward all.' That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown." (from A Charlie Brown Christmas) Indeed, it is. One voice that is somehow heard, a few believe, and amazing things quietly happen. It is the way of God.

One voice.....it is the voice of Gabriel.....it is the voice of Zachariah.....the voice of Linus. Listen for the voice amidst the noise of Christmas. Perhaps it is the promise of love that shines from the Advent candle. Perhaps it is the hope of Emmanuel, "God with us," because the way before you this Advent season is hard. Perhaps it is the kindness of a friend, or cookies from a child, or a Christmas card that begins the healing of a broken relationship.....or the silent beauty of a Christmas tree in the stillness of the night.....the beauty of simple light that shines in the darkness. One voice amidst all the noise.....it is good to listen, because God still speaks this time of year. It is the way of God.