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“Old Things, New Growth”

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:5-13, 57-66

NRSV - Pg.43-44 (NT)

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. (So Zechariah was an active leader in his church.) His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. (There's our backdrop, two outstanding people.) But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when Zechariah was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, (that's how they chose who did what, all by chance, a toss of the dice) according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. (Now remember, where the incense is located is a holy place, so this is a great honor for Zechariah. It also means he was alone during this time.) Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people were praying outside in the tabernacle. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. (Note this angel isn't just referred to as an angel, but an angel of the Lord, and it's noted the angel is on the right side, both of these details show reverence and authority to this angel.) When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But 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.

Down to verse 57. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. (That's very nice of them.) On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. (It was custom for neighbors, everyone around, to gather and bear witness for circumcision on the 8th day of the child's life and to announce the child's chosen name when presenting them.) But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” (Here's where these outstanding citizens begin to break from tradition. Here is where they become scandalise. In this time, the most common name for a son was that of their grandfather. The next most common is to take the name of their father. Seeing how Zechariah is older in age, it seems the townspeople assumed they'd name the child after his father. And I have to say, our translation of Elizabeth here lacks the emphasis the original Greek displays. There really should be an exclamation point added to her No! So Elizabeth has yelled No!)

Then the townspeople began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. But Zechariah asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “John is his name.” And all of them were amazed. (You see it wasn't customary to pick a name that wasn't a family name. Everyone was amazed. They were shocked. Zechariah and Elizabeth were great

people. They've done everything right. God is blessing them with this child and they're not even going to give the child a traditional family name?) Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. (THIS was the town gossip. First that this old barren couple that I imagine people knew or knew of, had conceived a child. Then that child was given a name that wasn't tied to his lineage. The name John means 'Yahweh is gracious'. So the hillsides of Judea are now asking themselves, what does the future hold for this child? What will he become to deserve such a name? What gracious act will God bestow through this child?

That's a huge question. The whole region of Judea are now looking at that child. In a society where names mean a lot. Your name defines who you are, where you're from. Your lineage, your destiny. And the great part of this story is that from the most unlikely of people, the old barren couple, a child has been born. A child who was given to them by God. And named by God. And because of that name's meaning, people are getting excited. People are hoping, they're dreaming. And because of this child a prophecy has been fulfilled. One has come to prepare the way for the coming Savior.

I know this time of year we often get caught up in our traditions. We have some great traditions. We shared in some of our communal traditions when we hung the greens together. If you recall some of our traditions dated back long ago. Some for only a few decades. Others as recent as last year. (With our Little People Nativity!)

We have lots of other traditions too. Christmas morning, we give and receive gifts. New Year's Eve we count down to the New Year, sing Auld Lang Syne, and kiss the one we're beside. February 2nd we wait for a groundhog to come out from it's hole in the ground and then watch to see if it's scared of it's own shadow. The first day of April, we play pranks and jokes on each other. April Fools! October 31st each year we dress our kids up in weird and fun costumes and send them to neighbors homes to ask for candy. Each Thanksgiving the President of the United States pardons a turkey from making it's way into an oven or onto a table. The day after Thanksgiving stores put on huge sales and large crowds of people go out searching for the best deals they can find. For one month out of the year, some of us decorate the outside of our homes with large colored bulbs, simply to bring a smile to someone else's face. The things that have become tradition are sometimes a little...odd. We have traditions that we follow, simply because they are tradition. They are expected. Just as the child's name was expected for them.

In our story today we have a lot going on in this tiny birth narrative. We have an older couple finally becoming parents. We have an Angel of the Lord appearing. We have a couple breaking tradition, upsetting a whole region, and allowing God to name their child. But ultimately we see God fulfilling the promise to send one to prepare the way for the Savior. John comes into this world before Jesus to prepare a way for him. That's the gracious act this child bestows through God.

Every church, every family, every town, has their own traditions. And each of those has dealt with changing traditions over time. New family members added by marriage or birth. Other family members passing. Moving homes. Blending families. Empty nesters. We change traditions and find new ones. And just as it was with Zechariah and Elizabeth, it's both scary and exciting.

Listen to what God is calling us to do and dream about. And remember that God fulfills promises. I pray we all know when breaking with tradition is necessary to birth new hope into our world. What gracious act will God bestow upon your life?