

In the Office

3rd Sunday in Advent – December 10/11, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Luke 1:5-25 (NRSV)

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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.” ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” ¹⁹The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

We continue our series, “Where Does Jesus Begin With You?” We’ve met Jesus in the wilderness and in the church. Today, we look at Zechariah’s big surprise in the office.

The office?

You may not think of the temple in Jerusalem as “the office,” but it was certainly the workplace of the priests of Israel. The priestly system was built around animal sacrifice and in the busy festivals of the Jewish year, the Jerusalem priests had their hands full, literally, keeping up with the demands of the populace. In about 6BC, one of the priests was a very old man named Zechariah who was married to an equally old woman named Elizabeth. Much to their disappointment, the old couple was childless.

One day, as Zechariah’s department was fulfilling its priestly duties, the old man was chosen to enter God’s sanctuary and

A Spiritual Key

In her book, *Beginnings: Keys That Unlock the Gospels*, Morna Hooker helps us to see that the beginning of each Gospel is a key that unlocks our understanding of the rest of the Gospel. Mark’s Gospel has a dramatic key that introduces us to the ever-mounting action leading to Jesus’ passion in Jerusalem. Matthew uses a prophetic key, emphasizing Jesus’ fulfillment of the Old Testament expectations of God’s Messiah.

Luke uses what Professor Hooker calls a spiritual key. Many of us might assume that she is talking about our own spirituality, as if Luke’s Gospel will unlock our internal spiritual life.

But that isn’t what she is talking about at all. Rather, she writes,

“Throughout these first two chapters there is repeated reference to the Holy Spirit. That is yet another vital clue to the significance of what is taking place. It is God who is at work – the God was at work in the great events of the Old Testament story. To talk about God’s ‘Spirit’ is really another way of talking about God at work in the world, active and dynamic. The same Spirit of God who had acted to save his people and had inspired the prophets, is now at work in Zechariah and Elizabeth, in Mary and John, and above all else in Jesus himself.”

Here is some of the Spirit’s work in the beginning of the Gospel. An angel tells Zechariah that his wife will have a son who will be filled with the Spirit. An angel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would bear a son. Pregnant Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit when pregnant Mary comes to visit her. Surely directly inspired by the Spirit, Mary bursts into the Magnificat, the song of praise.

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offer up incense.¹ This was quite an honor for Zechariah and something that he may have waited for his whole life.

Alone inside the sanctuary and somewhere during the middle of the ritual, the divine burst in upon Zechariah and all thoughts of the sacred ceremony were set aside. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, stood on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was terrified. As was the necessary custom among angels, Gabriel told the old man, “Don’t be afraid.” His prayers were about to be answered.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had always strived to lead holy and righteous lives. Not only was Zechariah a temple priest, Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel. But still, their lives have been clouded by the sadness and even disgrace of childlessness. This would have fallen especially hard on Elizabeth, as, in their world, a woman’s barrenness was seen to be a reproach from God. Now, they were too old for there to be any possibility of a child.

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Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks God’s word himself. I could go on, but all that is just from Luke’s first chapter.

What’s so intriguing is that after 4:30 (the end of Luke’s beginning), Luke hardly mentions the Holy Spirit again until we get to his second volume, the book of Acts. In Acts, God’s Spirit is the one behind all the action, continually directing and empowering the work of the Apostles and others.

The relative absence of the Spirit in the rest of Luke is probably best explained by assuming that much of the material Luke used in his Gospel did not reference the work of the Spirit. Thus, in his introduction, Luke wanted to ensure that the reader heard the story of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection in light of what had come before, namely, the work of the Spirit. Luke wants us to grasp from the beginning who is behind the events of Jesus’ life.

When you read through Luke’s opening chapters, you’ll notice that Luke uses many introductions. The first (1:1-4) is a typical literary introduction to Luke’s history, telling the reader of Luke’s purposes and methods. The second introduction (1:5) places the events firmly in the Jewish world of the temple and Judea. Yet another introduction begins at 3:1 and grounds events in the reign of Caesar, the gentile world. Luke’s story may begin with an old priest at the temple, but it will carry the Gospel story across the Roman Empire by the time we reach the end of volume 2.

Luke uses his many literary talents to help us see that in the story of Jesus, we have an even larger story of God’s work to rescue his people and renew all of his creation.

But with God, the impossible becomes the possible. An angel was standing in front of Zechariah promising a child. And not just any child! Many people would rejoice at their son’s birth. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would lead people back to the LORD. In the spirit of Elijah, their son would make the people ready for the coming LORD.

As you might imagine, Zechariah found all this a bit hard to swallow. As many of us would, he wanted some sign that Gabriel’s message was truly from God. But doubt can be dangerous. Zechariah was struck mute for his lack of faith and would remain so until his son’s birth. When Zechariah emerged from the temple, the crowd understood that he had experienced a vision of some sort because he could do no more than make signs. Elisabeth, of course, would conceive and give birth to a male child. He would grow up to fulfill the vocation given him by God and would be called John the Baptist.

Wherever he can find us

Where does Jesus begin with us? Anywhere he can find us. Though Zechariah had stepped into the temple, he was not prepared to be confronted by the presence of God and he was certainly not expecting any answered prayers. Perhaps that is how it is for us. When we go to the office or to the mall or to school, we aren’t really expecting to run into God. At church, yes. The office, no. We don’t remember that we live every moment of every day in God’s presence.

Zechariah had stepped into the temple in Jerusalem, God’s dwelling place. It was the place of God’s presence in a way that God was not present elsewhere. The incense Zechariah burned was to protect him from God’s presence. But now hear Paul’s words: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you” (1 Corinthians 3:16).

If each of us is truly God’s temple, the place where God dwells, then of course we live in God’s presence. It is not possible for us to escape from God or to hide from him. We may not always feel like God is with us . . . but he is. Our task is to live our lives in accordance with that truth. Where does Jesus begin with us? Pick the place. Pick the time. He is there. Emmanuel, *God-with-us*.

¹ In Exodus 30, God commands that the priests of Israel are to burn holy incense (a general term for aromatic plants) in front of the “holy of holies” in the temple. The smoke from the incense would protect the priests from the presence of God. (See also Leviticus 16)

Daily Bible Readings

(more readings from Luke's introduction)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 1:1-56 The births of John and Jesus foretold; Mary visits Elizabeth</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 1:57 - 2:21 The births of John and Jesus</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 2:22 - 3:22 Jesus at the temple; John in the wilderness; Jesus' baptism</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 3:23 - 4:13 Jesus' genealogy (this one goes all the way to back to Adam to emphasize that Jesus is savior of all); the temptation of Jesus</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 4:14-30 The beginning of the Galilean ministry and Jesus' rejection at Nazareth. Pay attention to the passage that Jesus chooses to read.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

December Book Recommendation

Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)

St. Andrew will be reading and preaching *Thru the Bible* next year. Many of us will be using the new *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* put together by Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and others. The *Renovaré* team has tried to combine the best of a study Bible and a devotional Bible in a single volume. The introductory materials and the book introductions are particularly helpful.

We have gotten copies of this Bible at a much reduced price. What a great gift idea!
Copies are available for \$25 outside the bookstore today and next Sunday.

Thru the Bible Reading Plan and Tips

God's Spirit uses our reading of Scripture to reshape our hearts and minds so that we become evermore Christlike. It is this reshaping, this renewing of ourselves, that has brought many of us to this one-year Bible reading journey. The book-at-a-time reading plan we'll be using is available on-line at www.standrewccl.org, as are some tips for reading through the Bible.

Copies of the reading plan and tips will be in the worship bulletins beginning next Sunday.

We hope you'll consider joining us on this Bible journey.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Brother Lawrence was a monk who lived in France more than three hundred years ago. He sought to live always in the presence of God. By this, he meant living in constant awareness of and communication with God. For Brother Lawrence, the "how" of this was simple: keep an ongoing conversation with God. Through good and bad. Through ups and downs. Through it all. God is with us, so don't ignore him. Brother Lawrence kept to a schedule of set prayers each day, but I like this quote: "I make it my business only to rest in His holy presence, which I keep myself in by a habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God. This often causes in me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them, and prevent their appearance to others." His set prayers were no more than a "continuation of the conversation."

You might spend some time talking about what you think Brother Lawrence meant. What would a "silent and secret conversation with God" be like? How could we stay in constant conversation with God throughout our busy day? Do we even want to acknowledge that we live in God's presence? Perhaps we'd prefer to pretend that God is busy elsewhere so we can do what we want. But the truth is that God meets us in the office, at school – any and every place. Jesus begins with us where we are. Perhaps this is as simple as Brother Lawrence's advice to a Christian who sought a closer relationship with God: "Recommend to him, if you please, that he think of God as often as he can." How often do you think of God?