

Child of Promise

In the name of him for whom John the Baptizer prepared the way, dear friends in Christ: The birth of a child – it's surely one of life's happiest events, a time of marveling at the miracle of God's ongoing creation, and experiencing the joy of receiving an additional member into the family. And it's not just the family that rejoices; the birth of a child gives the entire community cause to celebrate. We recognize that we all gain something inherently good when a child is born among us – something good in the present which carries over into our future and helps shape and bless it. And with the new parents we wonder what this child will be. What kind of personality will he or she have? Who will they become? What will they accomplish?

It's the parents, of course, who always have the biggest dreams. Who knows? Maybe our child will become the President of the United States, or an Olympic Gold Medalist, or a famous movie star. The sky is the limit as they consider their baby's potential and promise for the future. It's interesting though, have you noticed that no one ever imagines their child might become the *vice* president, or the candidate who runs for president and loses – the second runner up, or an Olympic silver or bronze medalist, or a not-quite-so-famous movie co-star or character actor? No one does that. And why should they? As long as you're dreaming about your child's future, you might as well dream big, right?

As we heard in this morning's Gospel, that's what people were doing when the baby who would become known as John the Baptizer was born. Because of the strange and amazing circumstances surrounding his birth, everyone who heard about it was wondering "What will this child be?" His parents, however, were not wondering. They knew exactly who and what their son would become. They knew that he was a child of promise – God's promise.

You may recall that Zechariah and Elizabeth were an older couple, and that they were well acquainted with disappointment. In keeping with the traditions of their day, they probably married while quite young, in their mid to late teens. And like any other couple back then, they hoped to fill their home with the sound of little feet and children's voices. But it didn't happen. Elizabeth was barren. And so months of repeated disappointments and unanswered prayers gave way to long years of shattered hope and resigned despair. And whenever another child was born into their community, though they shared the joy, certainly, it was a bittersweet thing because it also reminded them of how their empty arms ached to hold a baby of their own.

Zechariah was a Levite of the House of Aaron, and therefore a priest of God. For six weeks each year, when his division was on duty, he ministered at the Temple in Jerusalem. There he would have offered the required sacrifices and helped to lead public worship. The rest of the year he spent at home in a village in the hill country of Judea, where he would have had duties as not unlike a pastor and teacher today. He would have taught God's Word in the local synagogue and very likely taught children to read the Scriptures. He also would have been like a village elder, solving disputes, helping people to get along, and teaching them how to apply God's Word to their lives.

This was his calling, and from what we know and can infer, it seems that it too was a disappointment to him. When he started many years before, he probably had the same youthful optimism everyone has when they begin a new career. And to think that he would get to minister before the Lord God at his altar in the Holy City, it must have been pretty heady stuff.

And it was an age filled with hope. Only 100 years or so before Zechariah's birth, the Jewish nation had risen in rebellion against their Seleucid masters in Syria. For a brief period they had enjoyed being a free and independent nation – something that hadn't happened for many centuries. And what caused their revolt was the Seleucid king's hatred of the Jews and his insistence that they give up the worship of the one true God. To show his contempt for the Jews and for their faith, he defiled the Holy Place in the Temple, sacrificing pigs to a statue of the Greek god Zeus he set up there. It was more than the Jewish people could bear. So they waged a holy war against this wicked king and his forces. Filled with religious fervor and righteous indignation, they cast off the shackles of their oppressors under the leadership of a man called Judas Maccabeus, who was known as "the Hammer of God". It seemed like the dawning of a new day for God's people.

This period of Jewish independence didn't last long; but it whetted their appetites. And in the collective consciousness of the Jews there was a deep seated expectation that it would happen again soon. The age of Messiah was coming. God was going to redeem his people and bring back for them a king of the House of David. They were certain of it. Now, to be fair, they were thinking mostly in political rather than spiritual terms. But the point is that they could practically taste it; that's how close it seemed. And that would have been the prevailing mood when Zechariah began his ministry: this overall expectation that deliverance was at hand.

But that too did not happen; not during Zechariah's long career anyway. In fact, with the coming of the Romans and their imposing an iron grip on the entire Mediterranean world, every day it looked like the fulfillment of the long hoped for promise that God would raise up a Jewish king was moving farther away. That's what Zechariah would have experienced for his 30 or so years of service: this sense of constantly diminishing hope. And to add insult to injury, the Romans ruled the Jewish nation through a political puppet named Herod. He claimed the title "King of the Jews" for himself; but he wasn't a Jew at all. In fact, he was an Edomite – a member of a race that was historically hostile to the Jews. This Herod, who was a lapdog for the Romans, ingratiated himself to the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem (the ones who stayed their year round) by spending a fortune repairing and upgrading the Temple for them. So they liked Herod, and were willing to put up with him; but to a faithful priest like Zechariah, it would have seemed like they sold out. For the price of some marble and gold leaf on the columns, the men he was supposed to look up – the religious leaders of the nation – were happy to support a tyrant and an imposter.

So put yourself in Zechariah's sandals: though he dearly loves his wife, Elizabeth, there is a heavy blanket of sadness that overlays their home. He is powerless to lift it. And in his professional life he has seen his hopes and dreams go from astronomically high to nearly nonexistent. His youthful idealism and optimism are long gone. Now, nearing the end of his career, he is heartbroken, cynical, and embittered. Nothing has turned out like he hoped it would. It seems to him that the Lord has forgotten his promises and his people. And that's ironic, because his name, Zechariah, means "the Lord remembers". Now that name mocks him, because he doesn't believe it anymore.

This was his frame of mind when his division of priests was last on duty in Jerusalem. And it happened while he was there that he was chosen by lot one evening to offer the prayers on behalf of the nation. It was a rare privilege, because it meant going into the Holy Place of the Temple, and standing at the Altar of Incense which stood immediately before the curtain behind which was the Glory of God. Some priests worked their whole lives and never got to do it even once. Whether Zechariah had done it before, we don't know; but because of his age, it was doubtful that he'd ever have the opportunity again. I'm sure he knew that this was the last time

he'd minister there. And perhaps he thought it a fitting end to his long career: a final highpoint to cap off what had otherwise been a great big disappointment.

So, all the preparations were made. Zechariah performed the obligatory ritual washings. He put on his finest vestments. The evening sacrifice was offered. They lit the fragrant incense in the swinging censor that he was to carry in and set on the altar. And then while the rest of the priests and the people waited outside on the Temple courts, Zechariah went into the Holy Place to stand before the Lord. He put the incense on the altar where the rising smoke represented the prayers of God's people ascending to heaven. And Zechariah prayed – not just any prayers, not ones he made up on the spot; no, Zechariah offered the ancient liturgical prayers of Israel. He prayed for the Lord's blessing on his people. He prayed for the good of the nation. He prayed for the fruitfulness of the land, the faithfulness of the people, and all sorts of other things according to a specific formula that had been handed down through countless generations of priests. It was a prayer he knew by memory because he had repeated it often; but while he knew it by heart, he no longer believed it in his heart. Hope had died within him. He was just going through the motions and mindlessly speaking the words. And then he came to the prayer's climax, the ultimate hope of God's people: that the Lord would remember the promise he gave to Abraham, to all the patriarchs, and to David, the promise to send the Savior, the one who would redeem Israel from its sins and through whom all nations on earth would be blessed.

At that precise moment an angel of God suddenly appeared beside him. The old priest was terrified. But the angel said, "Don't fear, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard." I wonder if he even knew what prayer the angel was talking about, since it's doubtful that Zechariah was paying any attention to the words that he himself was speaking. But the angel went on and explained that the time had indeed come for the Lord to send the Savior into the world, and that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth would have the honor of being the parents of the man whom the prophets foretold would prepare the way for him. You are to name this child John, the angel told him; which means "The Lord is gracious" – an eternal truth that Zechariah had forgotten.

And which he no longer believed; so he asked the angel to prove it to him. Give me a sign, he insisted. (Side note: if an angel appears to you with a message from God, that's a sign. You don't need another one.) But the angel said, "All right; here's your sign: since you no longer believe the words of God you have been called to speak, you won't be able to speak until this word has been fulfilled." Zechariah was made mute. When he opened his mouth he could make no sound come out.

When his division of priests was relieved, he returned home. And sure enough, shortly thereafter his dear old wife Elizabeth was with child. It was nothing short of miraculous. And it became the talk of the town – with no doubt many references to Abraham and Sarah to whom, two thousand years before, the Lord gave a long hoped for child of promise in their old age.

I was a long time getting to it, but it's the fulfillment of God's word to Zechariah that we have as this morning's Gospel. The happy occasion is the birth, circumcision, and naming of the child God promised to give to Elizabeth and Zechariah. At long last they were able to hold a son of their own, which filled them with joy; but more importantly this child of promise restored their hope and trust in God. And according to the Word of the Lord they named him John – because now they had the living proof that the Lord is gracious indeed. And when Zechariah had written those words, the curse of his muteness was lifted. And he began to speak words from God that he firmly and resolutely believed.

He praised the Lord for this miracle, and for his remembering the promises he made to his people and making good on them. He even speaks of the horn of salvation that the Lord has raised up in the House of David, which is a reference not to his son John, but to Jesus – Jesus who is at that very moment a guest in Zechariah’s home. He won’t be born for another six months, but his mother, the Virgin Mary, is staying with them and helping her cousin Elizabeth with all the additional duties she has as a new mother. The point is, though, that Zechariah knows there is another child of promise present. He knows that he won’t live to see it, but through this child the Lord will fulfill all of his promises to his people to redeem them and set them free forever.

And then he turns his attention to his young son. Taking John in his arms he tells him, “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 in the forgiveness of their sins; because of the tender mercies of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet in the way of peace.” This too Zechariah knows he will not live to see. But at this point, he doesn’t need to see it to believe it. He knows with certainty that the Lord remembers his promises and always keeps them.

And we know he did. John grew up and became everything his father said he would be: the forerunner of the Christ, the one who prepared his way – prepared his way by calling people to repent of their sins and their unbelief and to be baptized, to be born again, to become a trusting children of all God’s promises that are fulfilled in and by Jesus Christ. This work of John continues today through the ministry of Christ’s Church where all of us are constantly being prepared to receive Jesus the Savior who comes to us with God’s gifts of forgiveness, grace, and mercy – the gifts he attained for us by his death for sin on the cross and his resurrection to new life. These gifts he guarantees to you personally. He promised them to you and gave you a sign to confirm them in your Baptism by which *you* became a child of promise.

This is why it’s important that we remember our Baptisms and live in them daily. There are times in all of our lives when things don’t go as we planned or had hoped. Few of us ever achieve all of our dreams. Life is full of setbacks, failures, and disappointments – and sometimes outright tragedies. They can break your heart. And sometimes it isn’t any one crisis or problem, but a whole combination of smaller irritations that wear you down over time. And when we experience these things it’s easy to become discouraged and disappointed, and to give into the temptation to lose hope. At such times it may seem that even the Lord has forgotten you. And then when you come here to his house to worship and to pray and to supposedly to receive God’s gifts you feel like it’s all empty, that there’s nothing going, that you and me and all the rest of us are just mouthing a lot of meaningless words. There’s no one hearing your prayers.

It’s not possible. You are a child of God’s promise. In Baptism you were united with Christ who is the ultimate Child of Promise. His Father became yours. And in Christ you have every promise of the Father fulfilled – even though you don’t see all of them in this life. You don’t have to see them to know they are true. You have God’s Word on it – God’s Word combined with water placed upon your head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Believe it. Remember it. Rejoice in it, now and always. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!