



“Laying the Foundation”

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Luke 1:57-80

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If the story of Jesus is about God making a home among us, the story of John is the foundation on which that home was built.

To fully understand the Gospel Lesson for today, we need to go back further in the story. Elizabeth and Mary were cousins. Mary would become the mother of Jesus. But before that, Elizabeth would have a miraculous birth of her own.

Elizabeth was married to Zechariah, a priest who lived and served in the hill country of Judea. He was a priest not by vocational choice, but by succession across generations from priestly families. Zechariah was descended from the line of Abijah; Elizabeth from the line of Aaron. Luke tells us they faithfully followed Torah and were righteous in God’s eyes.

One day, when it was Zechariah’s turn to present incense in the inner sanctuary while the rest of the worshipers prayed outside, the angel Gabriel appeared before him. As with every angelic appearance in scripture, Zechariah was terrified. And, like every other angelic appearance, Gabriel told him not to be afraid. “Your prayers have been answered.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth had tried for years but not been able to have children. Gabriel told him that Elizabeth would conceive and give birth to a son. They were to name the baby John, which means “God is gracious.” Gabriel told Zechariah that this child would grow to be filled with the Spirit, prophesying and calling people back to God, preparing the way for God to come among them.

But Zechariah was stuck on one tiny detail. “Are you sure? We’re very old.” In other translations, Zechariah is gentler in reference to his wife, calling himself “an old man” but saying of Elizabeth simply that she was “getting on in years.” Zechariah had long ago given up hope that they would ever have children, and he didn’t easily take up that hope again now.

Gabriel apparently didn’t appreciate being questioned. After reminding Zechariah that he was sent *by God* to deliver this message, he assured him that what he had foretold would happen as he’d predicted. But because Zechariah questioned God’s message, he would be unable to speak until everything had taken place.

By this time, the people praying outside were growing concerned. He’d been in there a long time. What was going on? When was he going to come out and offer the priestly blessing? When Zechariah finally emerged, it was obvious something had happened. First of all, he couldn’t speak. Possibly, he couldn’t hear, either. He was changed, but they couldn’t say just how. Bewildered, everyone went home. Sure enough, soon after, Elizabeth became pregnant.

For nine months, Zechariah could not utter a word. Who knows what, if any, priestly duties he could perform. At last, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. On the eighth day, as was the custom, they took the child to be circumcised and named. When the other priest asked the child’s name, Elizabeth said his name was John. The relatives and neighbors with them were incredulous. No one in either Zechariah’s or Elizabeth’s family was named John. *Everyone* used family names for their children. Naming a child something else was simply not done. They gestured to Zechariah to see what he thought about this. He asked for a writing tablet and scribbled, “His name is John.” At that point, he regained his ability to speak.

The people around them were astonished. They didn’t know what to make of what happened – a woman too old to give birth having a healthy baby boy, a priestly family bucking tradition and using a name no one else in their family had, a priest struck mute suddenly and miraculously regaining his voice. They wondered, “What then will this child be?” (Which is a biblical way of saying, “What’s going to become of this kid?”)

And then Zechariah sang a song. That happens a lot in Luke’s gospel. The first few chapters read like a Broadway musical. His song makes up most of our Gospel Lesson today. Now, we might expect a proud papa to gush over his baby boy. But Zechariah’s song is a song of praise to God. And a full two-thirds of it is about the savior who is to come, *not* John. Finally, in the concluding four verses, he sings about the life his son will have. He will be a prophet, going before

the Lord to prepare the way. He will proclaim coming salvation through the forgiveness of sin. He will give light to those in darkness. And he will guide us on the path of peace.

Just as John's ministry would build the foundation for Jesus, Zechariah's song laid a foundation for John's development. His words, sung boldly among his neighbors and whispered tenderly in his son's ear, would establish the frame for John to grow and become strong in character, fulfilling his father's vision and surpassing his legacy. Zechariah was a priest; John would be a prophet. Zechariah carried the authority of his office; John would be equipped with the power of Elijah. Zechariah ministered to the people; John would turn the people back to God.

Like the other songs in Luke's gospel, Zechariah's song – which we refer to as the *Benedictus* – spoke of a reversal of fortunes and God's deliverance to come. It foretold our salvation that would fulfill the promise made to Abraham and his descendants. It proclaimed God's reign of justice coming upon the world. But it also envisioned an extraordinary role for John, coming in the tradition of the prophets and fulfilling their prophecies at the same time. And it expressed a confidence that God would do extraordinary things through him, bringing hope and peace that the people could only dream of.

How do our words and our witness inspire and lift up those who follow us? Zechariah's song reminds us of the power of words, especially words spoken to younger generations as we lay the foundation for their spiritual homes. Do our words encourage or inhibit the creativity and insight of those around us? Do we have the vision to see what might yet be, or are we stuck in the limited reality of what we've always known? Maybe we, like Zechariah, need to be "struck mute" for a while – stepping back and listening for God's voice to help us see what God is birthing around us.

This season is all about home – the homes we make, the homes where we celebrate, the home God is calling each of us to inhabit. As we make our way toward the coming of Christ into our lives and our hearts once again, let's pray for God to open our *minds* to what God is bringing to life in us, bringing to life around us, bringing to life *through* us. Let's sing boldly our own songs of praise and hope, using words that build faith and imagination. May God give us the grace – and the sense – to provide a foundation God can use to bring forth a hope and peace we can only dream of. Amen.