

You are invited to take a journey with me this Advent season towards the world of light. Wait...reverse that...towards the Light of the World. During the next four weeks we will journey towards the light of the world through Memory, through Potential, through Joy, and through the Gentiles. This series is based on the Advent Study, Light of the World by Amy-Jill Levine. Amy is the head of the New Testament studies department and Vanderbilt Seminary. She is also unapologetically Jewish. She uses her....to uncover subliminal meanings behind the familiar words of the Gospel story of Jesus.

In this series we are going to trace the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph and Mary, and the Wise Men. In their unique way, these stories will highlight an aspect of what Jesus represents as our coming Light of The World. They will remind us of the importance of the past, the power of potential, the necessity of joy, and the role of the unexpected, the Gentiles in the birth story of the Messiah. Are you ready, I'm ready, let's rock and roll!

Today, Zechariah's story will help us see how knowing our past, remembering our past is vital as we consider any new adventure, even that of a soon to arrive on earth Messiah.

Knowing the where and when of Jesus. Don't you think that would help us understanding him better? The Temple in Jerusalem, Bethlehem in Judea, Nazareth in Galilee, Egypt the temporary home of Jesus and his family. These are more than just locations. The likes of Herod the King and Caesar Augustus. They bring more than dates in history with them. And when a writer takes time to point out a date or location, we'd better pay attention.

Luke chooses to begin the magnificent Christmas story with Elizabeth and Zechariah. (Mary and Joseph, you will have to wait.) This couple represents the older generation, a connection to the past, a link to communal memory. This childless couple will soon join the likes of Abraham and Sarah. Elizabeth and Zechariah, in their old and hopeless age will have a child.

Luke introduces us to our main character today, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Wait until you hear their pedigree. Zechariah was from the priestly line of Abijah, the son of Samuel. But (drum roll) Elizabeth was actually a direct descendant of Aaron. (That would be Moses' brother)

The meanings of their names are no less spectacular. Zechariah is from the Hebrew root zkr. It means ‘remember’. The last part of his name is yah...sounds a whole lot like...”YHWH”. Zechariah means “God remembers” Remembering is something that God does consistently throughout the bible. After the flood and using a rainbow as a sign of a covenant, God says, “ I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being...Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures.

Remembrance is vital. We cannot know fully who we are, unless we know our origins. With each new experience we reassess our origins. Each new experience helps us find new and deeper meanings from the past.

Let’s look at Elizabeth now. Elizabeth’s name is partly derived from Eli meaning “my God”. The second part comes from the word sheva which means oath. Her name literally means God keeps promises. Again, God remembers.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s lineage trace back to Aaron. Priesthood was not a vocation in Judaism. If your father was a priest then you were a priest. If your father was a Levite, then you were a Levite. While we do not have a temple today, priests still have duties. For example, it is a priest who will be called to say a blessing before and after the Torah reading on Shabbat or the Sabbath.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are described by Luke as righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord’s commandments and regulations. Dikaios is the Greek word used for righteous. When Luke uses this word, he is not referring to correct theology. No, Luke is talking about behaving in a way marked by justice.

One thing Luke makes clear is that Elizabeth’s infertility was not the result of sin. Biblical history can point to many other women who suffered from infertility. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Manoah the mother of Samson, Hannah mother of Samuel.

Infertility was a real thing even back in Biblical times, so when the Bible mentions a couple suffering from infertility, it usually meant that conception is on the horizon. These same couples should be prepared. At least one, if not both of them are bound to receive an angelic messenger. Let's get to the meat of the story. Zechariah is an ordinary village priest. There were many just like him, so not all of them could serve in the temple. Casting lots was how they chose which village priest would serve at the temple. Coincidentally...the lot fell on Zechariah this time.

Zechariah was to perform the incense offering. This means placing the incense on the altar. Scent was a part of the Jewish worship experience, along with sights, sounds, tastes, and attention to body. For Jews worship wasn't only about spiritual uplifting, it was also to be aesthetically pleasing, giving the gift of beauty in a world that was marked by poverty, disease, and death.

So here we have Zechariah going about his business when..dun dun dun dun. The angel appears. Zechariah isn't just surprised, he is tarasso. He is terrified. He is literally shaken up. Luke uses same word is used to describe Herod's reaction to hearing about the birth of Jesus and the reaction of his disciples when Jesus appears to them after his resurrection in Luke 24.

Being shaken up. Sounds like a great reaction to the Advent good news. While we're putting up the tree, while we're baking all of our goodies, while we're wrapping up the presents, remember that the birth of Jesus was something to shake up routine, something that gets us to see the world otherwise. Being shaken up is what it means to follow Jesus.

The angel plows through the terror. "Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son. You must name him John." John was a common name meaning God is gracious."

The angel goes on. "Many people will rejoice at his birth." These many people will expect something special from this baby. Something of earthly value. This baby will be able to carry the family name and care for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

They will be disappointed. As Gabriel goes on, John was to be the new Elijah. “He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

There it is! There’s the purpose of Advent. Preparation. Preparation is a necessity to be ready for the light of the world. Like Elijah, John will help in turning the people. Turning requires action. It means taking action to restore right relationships. It means looking back and seeing where we got off track. It means asking hard questions like “what should I have done that I didn’t do?” Or, “What did I do that I should not have done?” Or even, “How do I get on the right road and then walk forward. When people turn to the right path, they become “a people prepared for the Lord.”

This is good news right? This is really good news. Zechariah...what do you say to this really good news? “My wife and I are very old.” (Big sigh)

Gabriel gets downright huffy. “I am Gabriel. I stand in God’s presence.” (Who are you to doubt me.” The good news is that this good news is not passed on to another deserving couple. No Zechariah and Elizabeth will still be part of the plan. But Zechariah does not get off Scott free. “You will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

In the meantime, we’ve forgotten something. There are people waiting outside the Temple. They’ve been expecting Zechariah to come out for a LONG time now. And boy were they ready to give him a piece of their mind. No one likes to be held in a church service for too long. But when he appears they quickly realize a few things. A) He cannot speak and B) he’s seen a vision. Zechariah gestures to them, trying to describe what he saw and heard. Talk about the ultimate game of charades.

He goes back home to Elizabeth and again is left with hand gestures to try to tell Elizabeth what is about to happen. Elizabeth is a smart woman and figures out the whole scheme. Then goes

into seclusion for 5 months. Another smart move. Elizabeth calls this conception for what it is. A gift from God who, “has shown me favor by removing my disgrace among other people.”.

John’s birth was a time of great rejoicing. Parents, family, friends all remained until the 8th day when the baby would be circumcised. Now because Zechariah couldn’t talk, everyone had decided (except Elizabeth) that the baby boy should be named after his father. They didn’t realize this was to be a new time and a new practice as Elizabeth insists, “No, his name will be John”. Because Elizabeth is a woman they doubt her. Zechariah saves the day by scribbling on a tablet these 4 words. “His name is John”

Finally Zechariah’s tongue is untied. After 9 long months. His first words, what would they be? They would be a song. You may know them as the Benedictus, which in Latin means blessed and is the opening word of the song.

This song goes on to provide the assurance that, whatever new thing this will be, there is a rock-solid base. God is invested in history on all levels. It’s not an investment of micromanaging or eliminating free will. This new thing would be concerned for the world and all of its inhabitants. It would support God’s investment. Together Torah and the Gospel would guide us toward the good.

Zechariah’s prayer is an assurance. God has acted in the past. Those actions have repercussions for the present and the future. The verbs in Zechariah’s prayer are past tense. God has come to help and God has delivered.

Fast forward to our present day. Is it possible that remembering, or learning from our own history is part of God’s investment in us? Part of our responsibility to each other? Church family, remembering and learning from our own history is our responsibility to each other. Say that with me, “remembering and learning from our own history is our responsibility to each other.”

Zechariah goes on to speak of God’s holy covenant with Abraham, insisting that this covenant continues. This covenant with Abraham is a both/and not an either/or type of covenant. It’s for both Jews and Gentiles. “In you (Abraham) all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Zechariah has words in his song for his son, John. “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,” John will take on the role of prophet, a truth teller. He will go before Jesus to prepare his way. Just like the prophet Isaiah states in chapter 40.

By evoking Isaiah, Luke tells his readers to fill in the blanks after vs 1. Through Zechariah, Luke is reminding the Jews of the exile and return, the promise and the fulfillment, of ancient Israel and the new movement to come.

Zechariah’s song offers two more thoughts. First John’s work will be connected to the forgiveness of sins. John will offer how forgiveness is demonstrated. “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same. Also, Zechariah speaks of light to those who sit in darkness. Not just spiritual darkness, but those who for whatever reason live in physical darkness.

Chapter 1 of Luke ends with this update on John. “The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry.” Eventually John would sit in darkness and then be murdered by Herod Antipas.

Today we have Zechariah’s song to show that John knew what he was called to do. With the meaning of memory fully in his grip he knew that the cup would not pass from him or from the one he was preparing the way for. Yes, John lost his life, but may his message be remembered.