

12/15/2010

THE SCRIPTURE LESSONS

The Men of Advent

Zechariah

Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 **Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."**

19 **The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."**

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

. . . 57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." 62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbors were all

filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. 67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. 69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David 70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us-- 72 to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham: 74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

THE PRAYER (In Unison) Almighty God, You promised to Zechariah to send a son who would prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. Give us faith in your word so that we may be prepared to receive Jesus when He comes to us. We pray in your holy name. Amen.

Joseph

Matthew 1:18-24

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" --which means, "God with us." 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

THE PRAYER (In Unison) Almighty God, You told Joseph you were sending Your Son to his fiancée, Mary, and even though Joseph did not understand, he obeyed. Help us to hear and obey your word even when we don't understand. We pray in your holy name. Amen.

THE MEDITATION 'The Men of Advent – Stumbling Obedience' - Luke and Matthew 1

The ancient Jews were taught, “If everyone could be perfect for one day, Messiah would come and bring his kingdom to Israel.” It never happened that way, did it?

How about yourself? Have you ever tried to be good, tried to be faithful and loving, just for one day? I remember just such an effort as a small boy, and the results are not pretty.

Or maybe you’ve heard the joke about the little boy sitting on his dad’s lap who asked, “Dad, why do you have some white hairs on your head?” The dad thought he was smart and told his son, “Well son, when you act up it causes me worry, and I get a white hair.” The boy thought for a moment and asked, “Dad, why is *grandpa’s* hair all white?”

I share these stories because, even though we don’t like to talk about failure and sin, especially in today’s world, it is a reality that cannot be ignored. We have all failed to be loving, or faithful. And even when we try to do good and right, we often fail and act selfishly.

All of this helps us understand the two men in today’s Bible readings. You would think that the adults who Scripture tells us about who were part of the birth of Jesus would be people who were real examples, people of character and righteousness. After all, this is God’s Son who is coming. And, in a patriarchal world into which Jesus was born, you would think the men would be especially good examples. But, when we read what God tells us about Zechariah and Joseph, the two adult men who had a part in welcoming the son of God, we see people who doubt, people who question God’s plans, and people who try to take things in their own hands in ways that don’t serve God’s purpose.

Zechariah was a priest. He was at in the temple serving God according to his appointment when an angel appeared. Now, first he was afraid, which is what we are told about everyone when an angel appears. But then, when the angel tells Zechariah good news that his wife Elizabeth will have a son in her old age, a son who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, Zechariah doubted and questioned the angel. Some good example he was.

Joseph was from the tribe of Judah, an upright and faithful man, and engaged to Mary. But, when God acted by the Holy Spirit to send his son through Mary, Joseph could not understand that God was working, even in Mary’s pregnancy. He tried to take things into his own hands and quietly and lovingly divorce Mary. So much for being an example of courage and love.

The men of Advent, the men that God chose to help welcome the birth of His son, Jesus, were imperfect, confused, and doubting, just like we are. But we might say, “Thank you, Lord, for the men of Advent.” Because through the false steps of Zechariah and Joseph we see God act and learn more about him for our lives. In fact, there are 3 lessons for us in today’s readings.

First of all, the failure and sin of Zechariah and Joseph did not stop God from going through with His plan. In spite of John’s doubt Elizabeth had a son, John, who would prepare the way of Jesus. And in spite of the fact that Joseph could not see God’s plan to begin with, Mary still gave birth to Jesus, the Savior of the world. We need to know that our sin and failure does not keep God from reaching out to love and forgive us, to help and save us. We need God because of our failure, and He is here.

Secondly, after being confronted with their faults, Zechariah's doubt, and Joseph's mistaken plan about Mary, and after hearing God's plan, these men trusted God rather than themselves. John saw that Elizabeth was pregnant and trusted that God was working, even through his time of being unable to talk. Joseph heard that God was working to send His son, so he abandoned his plan and trusted God. It can be difficult to trust God when we have failed. It can be difficult to trust God when we don't know what is happening. But, when we trust Him we receive His love and He works through us and in our lives.

Finally, having realized their weakness and failure, and having seen God work, these men ultimately served God faithfully and willingly, in spite of their past failures. Zechariah wrote for his friends, "His name is John," and then sang a wonderful song of praise to God. Joseph took Mary home in the face of trouble because of Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' birth. Joseph was a faithful and loving husband and father, because he had seen God act and trusted God's wisdom rather than his own. We don't earn God's love because of our goodness, or our accomplishments. But God acts in love spite of our failures. When we see God's mercy, God's undeserved love, and God's wisdom and power in the middle of this world's trouble, when we trust Him, we want to obey Him, we want to serve Him, we want to share Him with others.

One year as Christmas approached I was having an especially bad time at school, because of my own misbehavior. I knew all the stories. I expected coal in my stocking and nothing under the tree. Yet that year I had perhaps my biggest surprise. Under the tree was a new bike I did not deserve, and hadn't even asked for. I knew my misbehavior, but my parents still acted in love, I grew in love for them, and tried my best to behave better.

As we live as children of God, waiting again for the birth of His son, we often fail. But God still acts in love and power in spite of our sin. When we see God's love we grow in faith, and are led to obey Him in love and faithfulness in ways that give God glory.

Thank the Lord for the men of Advent and their clay feet.