

Luke 1:57-80

*Close to Home: Laying the Foundation (Peace)*ⁱ

Second Sunday of Advent ~ December 5, 2021 ~ Sacrament of Holy Baptism

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

Before there were apps to help you come up with ideas of what to name your child, there were books, like *What Shall We Name the Baby?* Published in 1987, the year our first child was born, I can still picture its paperback yellow cover and how dog-eared it became as Bob and I eagerly poured over it. What *shall* we name our baby? Of course, before there were books, there were traditions and protocols. But forever since the beginning of homo sapiens, there have been and always will be opinions about names. Strong ones. Some voiced, others communicated with a look. Or perhaps a swift pivot to a nickname or a middle name. The morning after our first-born child made her grand appearance, my nurse came into the hospital room, took a look at her, and asked us "What did you name her?" Excitedly, we told her, "Emily!" To which she replied, "My parents named me Emily, but I changed it from "Emily" as soon as I was old enough to do that legally."

Today's scripture lesson from Luke chapter 1, begins on the day Elizabeth gave birth to her son who would grow up to become the man we know as "John the Baptist." That's right, today on our Second Sunday of Advent, our camera zooms in on the birth and naming of John, not Jesus. It is an extraordinarily parallel story to Luke's story of Jesus' birth: fear, amazement, pondering, and praising, all this in the story of John's birth, too. Complete with the Angel Gabriel kicking things off with his signature move: a startling appearance but *not* to the mom-to-be, like he does with Mary, but instead, to the dad-to-be, Zechariah. And Gabriel tell Zechariah that he should name his son, John.

At first, Zechariah, was so stunned, he questioned Gabriel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years." (Luke 1:18) He needed a sign, some kind of affirmation of this stunning, startling news. And Gabriel replied, "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." (Luke 1:20) He got his sign. Sort of. If you call being silenced for nine months a sign. That's where our story picks up today, in Luke 1:57.

Sermon:

Who *likes* to be "shushed"? I know I don't. I didn't even like the idea of being "shushed" when I was five years old and getting ready to go to kindergarten. Apparently, I loved to talk when I was very young. Imagine that! And my mom was really worried that I would have trouble in school because at home I had developed the capacity to talk non-stop. So, Mom sat me down and told me in a very serious voice that when I went to kindergarten, there would be 24 other children in my classroom who would also need to talk and we would all have one teacher whom we had to listen to carefully. Therefore, it was really important for me to work on staying quiet and letting other people talk. Apparently, I thought about this for a few seconds, then my face brightened and I said, "but I still have weekends and holidays!" Maybe that's why I ended up with a job where I'm actually *paid* to talk on Sundays and holidays. 😊

Here we have the old priest Zechariah, professional holy man, “shushed” by the angel of the Lord, Gabriel! But doesn’t that seem a little unfair? When Gabriel shocked Mary with the news that she would bear a son and name him Jesus, she too first responded with a question. “How can this be since I am a virgin?” Mary was not “shushed.” Young Mary was given a full explanation, and a call to believe in God’s power to work through the impossible. Yet when Zechariah did not immediately trust the promise would be fulfilled, he was silenced.

If you listen carefully to this story, you may hear a faint laughter in the distance of time and memory. The laughter that came Sarah when she overheard the news from another angel in the heat of the midday sun, while she was sitting in their tent by the Oaks of Mamre. Her first response was to laugh at the idea that at her old, old age she would finally have her first baby with Abraham after all these years. After all their steps and missteps. They would name their child “Isaac,” which means “laughter,” because of Sarah’s laugh at the mysterious visitor’s news of her otherwise impossible pregnancy. Luke is calling us to see Zechariah’s encounter with Gabriel was not a “one-off” but rather a sign and a pointer. Gabriel’s annunciation of John’s birth was an echo of God’s signature move: A seemingly impossible birth signals the fulfillment of God’s promise.

If you listen carefully, along with the faint laughter of Great Great Great grandmother Sarah, you may hear the sound of a shovel digging in the sandy dirt. That’s the metaphorical sound of Luke digging the foundation, building the scaffolding for us to see again God’s way of hope and peace in the making. The foundation of hope, peace and love, our forever home. One shovel full at a time, God was fulfilling the promise. God’s way, God’s kingdom power which was *not* through vassal King Herod, the local political operative for the Roman Empire at the time. No. Instead, God would choose come through an elderly priest and his childless wife.

Then after nine long months of silence, came Zechariah’s prophecy, and his *berakah* or blessing on his eight-day old son John. His blessing that would fully and poetically answer the question, “What then shall this child become?” He said, “And you, 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 by the forgiveness of their sins.” (Luke 1:76-77) John would grow up and build the scaffolding for the saving work of Jesus. The through line emerging here beginning with Abraham: God visiting people in the very midst of their oppression in surprising and amazing ways.

What about the “shushing” of Zechariah? The nine months of silence imposed upon the priest at this most thrilling moment of his life. Consider this: perhaps it wasn’t so much a punishment, as it was a gift. Yes, a gift and an invitation to Zechariah to enter a season of listening. Of stepping aside and hearing God speak to him through other people, through laughter and tears, silence and praise. A season in Zechariah’s life to learn to trust God, perhaps in a way he never had before. At a critical point in his life, Gabriel enrolled Zechariah in an intensive, immersive course in decentering.

What about us? Do we really trust God? More than we trust ourselves? Some have cleverly said that “ego” is an acronym for “Edging God Out.” We have so many ways to fill our days, our minds, our hearts, to be so preoccupied, that there is no space, no room for us to hear God’s voice. I hear in our story today, God asking us to consider in whom or what we place our trust. We live in a time where trust in others, in our institutions is eroding. In an article in the *Atlantic* by Jerry Useem titled, “The End of Trust: Suspicion is undermining the American Economy,”ⁱⁱⁱ he reported on a survey that suggests the percentage of Americans who believed “most people could be trusted” hovered around 45% as late as the mid-’80’s; but is now 30%. Yes, along with current our economic and political woes, perhaps intersecting with them is what we might call a “Trust Recession” that is getting worse.

According to a recent story in the *Harvard Business Review*, trust is about two things: competence (is this person going to deliver quality work?) and character (is this a person of integrity?). To trust colleagues in both of these ways, people need clear and discernible signals about them,” wrote the organizational experts Heidi Gardner and Mark Mortensen.” So as we sink into the quicksand of untrustworthiness, we are prone to what social scientists call, “fundamental attribution error.” That’s a fancy term for something Mr. Useem helps us understand with this work-place example: “it’s like the creeping suspicion that Blake hasn’t called us back because he doesn’t care about the project. Or because he cares about it so much that he’s about to take the whole thing to a competitor. All of this hyper suspicion in the absence of fact—that Blake had minor dental surgery—elaborate narratives assemble.”

I love that phrase: “elaborate narratives assemble” in the absence of fact. Or, I would add, in the presence of misinformation or disinformation. We create elaborate, sometimes passionate, narratives that eclipse the vision and drown out the voice of love. The One whom we can trust. The One who is our friend, no matter how incompetent or character-flawed we may be. The voice of our Savior who is the way of peace: within our spirits and between us and others. Our Savior who is the Truth and commanded us “to love one another as I have loved you.” Love is the only way because of how connected and interdependent, we truly are and always have been. To hear the anthropologists tell it, we once built reciprocity by picking nits from another’s fur. From the beginning we have needed one another. And from the beginning, we have all been prone to nits.

So, Homo sapiens, how are we Edging God Out this Advent? The one who can teach us how to trust again, trust better, trust deeper. Try this takeaway: Build in a little silence around the edges of your day. Leave your devices off when you are driving, or in the shower. Leave a little extra time so you can walk on a short errand. Consciously turn off your racing mental motor when someone is talking to you and give them your full attention, as if you did not have the capacity to speak. Zechariah can teach us a lot about stepping out of the way to make way for the one who is the way: the way of Love. The way of peace. From his gift of silence, he heard the voice of God, perhaps like he never had before. Zechariah experienced the tender mercy. He learned to trust all over again. Or for the first time. This starts by trusting the voice who says you are already enough, you are strong and good, nits and all.

What shall we name the baby? Walker, yes. Emily, yes, John, yes, Isaac, yes. And everyone of them and all of us are also named by our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, "Beloved."

ⁱ The sermon theme series, "Close to Home" and this sermon title was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org

ⁱⁱ Jerry Useem, "The End of Trust: Suspicion is Undermining the American Economy," *Atlantic*, December 2021, p. 22-24. The ideas, as well as the direct quotes, in these two paragraphs are drawn from this article.