

It seems like ages ago now, but when we started Advent seven weeks ago, the angel appeared to Old Zechariah, and let him know that he and Elizabeth would be parents. Their son John would be a good man – filled with the Holy Spirit, great in the sight of the Lord, a proclaimer whose message would help mend the hearts and minds of a stubborn people. It sure didn't take long! John's little legs kicked about, leapt even, in Elizabeth's womb. And when those little legs grew to adulthood, their big feet kicked up all sorts of dust in the wilderness. Channeling Isaiah, John called people toward repentance – a turning back toward God, an intentionality to be aware of God's presence in their daily lives. John spoke of valleys being filled up, mountains and hills made low, crooked roads made straight, rough paths made smooth, God's presence and God's children bursting into the present together.

It's funny though. All too often, because John is but a minor character in Luke's gospel, we tend to believe his tenure is short – he's a kind of star that burns white hot and quickly cools. But that's not really true. John is a model of persistent faith, molded by parents of that same persistent faith.

Like Sarah and Abraham, and Hannah and Elkanah before them, Elizabeth and Zechariah are faithful, exemplary, consistent people – they honor God in all they do, despite the disappointment of not bearing children. And when the gift of parenthood finally arrives, the two are not content to believe their work is done. Much like Hannah ensured Samuel's development, Elizabeth and Zechariah, despite their advanced age, do all of the hard work necessary to help parent John into his potential. Remember, John is raised as a Nazarene, meaning no impurities – that's juice boxes, that's happy meals, that's screen time – no impurities will threaten his development. And John, if he's the same

age as Jesus, spends nearly three decades living intentionally and contemplatively in such a way as to hear God speak anew.

On Christmas Eve, we declared Luke's gospel a story of readiness. Ready indeed. If, as Luke tells us, Elizabeth AND Zechariah were beyond child-bearing age, I'd imagine that would put them in their sixties or seventies. So...here is a family that has prepared for nearly a century to hear and experience God's Spirit, and to help make ready the arrival of Messiah. Would that any of us might have a fraction of their consistency and faithfulness!

In today's text, John has evolved to this point of clarity and authenticity. He is provocative, and charismatic, and his words stir hearts and souls. The text tells us that people are expectant. But they aren't just expectant, they are also eager. They are ready for this promise of Messiah to be realized right now, and hey, it might as well be John!

Lucky for us John is unique, and he's the person that finally articulates what needs to be said. Israel has always been a people of promise, children deeded the blessings bestowed upon Abraham's descendants. John gently, or perhaps not so gently, reminds his audience that promise is not entitlement nor is it exclusive. God promised to be present with Abraham. And in return, Abraham promised to live with God's presence. No, not as a saint, not as a model of perfection, but as one who was faithful. Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants, too, knew a God of hospitality, and forgiveness, and love, and provisions, and justice, and laughter, and patience. And more often than not, they sought to mimic God's good qualities in their own lives, and in their interactions with family, neighbor, stranger, and even enemy.

John is in the wilderness, and his ministry has sparked hundreds, maybe even thousands of people to come away on retreat and experience the Spirit, and perhaps even claim Messiah. But John wants his audience to know that the retreat isn't permanent. The goal is not to siphon off God from the world, and keep God in the country away from all those Roman city folk. The goal is to bring God's spirit into our own lives, our own communities, and let that Spirit transform our world. For John, baptism is not a vaccine or a transaction to acquire God's presence, and disassociate from the world, content with our own personal fulfillment. Baptism is an anointing and an equipping to go and live out God's call on our own lives. If coming up from the water were a sentence, it wouldn't be one that concludes with a period, but instead continues with an ellipsis, because the story isn't ending, it's beginning! Joy to the world, the Lord IS come. Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ IS born. Arise, your light IS shining. John calls us into an active faith.

I think it's also worth noting that Jesus isn't singled out in this initial gathering of seekers. Jesus is one of many who are provoked, inspired, and ultimately moved by John's testimony. And Jesus is among many who leave this place with a calling to engage their communities by voicing God's presence in their own lives, among their households and villages. Did you catch that? Jesus wasn't doing his discernment and formation in the VIP lounge. He was seeking, asking, yearning, stretching, struggling, questioning, laughing, chasing, living, loving, gathering in the same ways and you and me.

It's only after this communal participation that God's singles out Jesus, splits apart the heavens, and makes a proclamation of Jesus' identity, connectedness, and ultimate purpose. And here's what I think is even cooler. Jesus proceeds to heed John's wisdom – he re-enters the world, he engages his community, and demonstrates God's presence in our

lives by being wholly invested, present, and aware in every moment of his living. John spends a lifetime listening for God's voice, and being ready to instruct God's people on when and how to hear that voice. Jesus, upon receiving John's message, spends the remainder of his life seeking to illumine God's presence in every nook and cranny of the Galilee.

I think what I'm most compelled by in today's text is the humanity of both John and Jesus. Yes, there are stories of divine healing, and miracles, and exceptional behavior for each of them. But what's so striking to me about each person is how well they do the ordinary human things. They listen. They wait. They think. They are aware. They are present. Therefore, God's visibility and closeness rarely eludes them. And buoyed by God's presence, they speak with the Spirit, they love with the Spirit, they work with the Spirit, they hope with the Spirit, they live with the Spirit. Every moment. Every day.

I think the story of Baptism of the Lord Sunday is this: one life, rooted in God's spirit, can help heal a broken world. This morning, John and Jesus remind of an even more audacious truth: each and everyone of us has the potential to be a life, rooted in Spirit, lived in service of our neighbors, and capable of healing our world.

Good friends, God's beloved, may we remember our baptismal waters, and may they lead us in faithful pursuit of God's world.

Amen.