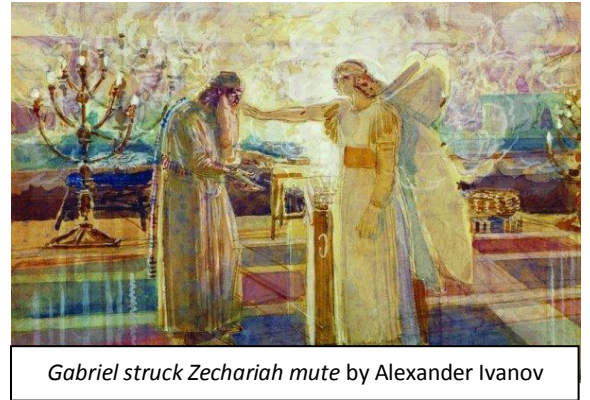


The Canticle that we hear this morning is the *Song of Zechariah*. You remember him don't you? Zechariah, the husband of Mary's cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah who would become the father of John the Baptist. And you remember don't you that Zechariah and Elizabeth were described as "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless" (see Lk.1:6). Why, these were two wonderful people Zechariah and Elizabeth, people you'd just love to get to know and break bread with, people whose company you would certainly cherish if they ever came your way.



But Elizabeth and Zechariah, well they have an empty place in their life together. Because, you see Zechariah and Elizabeth – well they're getting on in years, and still they have no children. And this was considered a mark of God's disfavor in the Israel of that time. To be a couple with no children was to be somehow passed over by the Lord God. To have no children was a sign that in some way you had displeased God, and He had withheld His blessing from you.

So, you can perhaps imagine Zechariah's surprise when, round about quitin' time one afternoon he's tending to his work, and do you know who suddenly appears before him. Well, it's an angelic presence straight from the throne-room of God. And this Angelic presence tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard, that he and Elizabeth are going to have a son. And not just any old son either. Because Zechariah and Elizabeth's son will be named "John." And the Angel says that John will be full of the Holy Spirit. Even from before his birth this son of Zechariah and Elizabeth will have an intimate knowledge of the Spirit of God.

And John, this son of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's will be a mighty force for God, turning many people toward their Savior. And John will walk with the power of Elijah, and change the very hearts of men, to prepare the way for no less than the anointed one, the Messiah himself (see Lk.1:14-17).

And do you know what Zechariah's response is to the angel? Well, I'm sorry to tell you that it was one of disbelief, and doubt. Zechariah says, "But how can this be? I'm an old man, and my wife is no spring chicken. How is such a thing even possible?"

Now, you know, scoffing at the proclamation of angels is never a really good idea. So, the angel says, "Zechariah do you have any idea just who you're talking to? I am the Archangel Gabriel. I have stood in the presence of the Lord God every day of my thousand-year-long life. That's the errand boy who is bringing you this message. And Zechariah, when somebody like me tells you how something is going to unfold, then how could you possibly doubt? But, I'm going to give you a while to think about this. So from this moment until your son is born, you will be struck dumb." And guess what, that's exactly what happened (see Lk.1:18-23).

For almost a year, Zechariah was struck speechless, unable to utter a single word. Can you imagine what those months must have been like to him? There must have been some heart-ache and shame in those months as Zechariah came to understand that he had doubted the promise of the Lord God. But, there must have been something else happening in this man's heart during that year of silence as well.

Because, on the eighth day of the infant John's life, when the boy is brought to the temple to be named, Zechariah's mouth is opened. And all of the realizations that have been revealed to this old man during the past year of silence come tumbling out of him, and this song of praise and exultation rises in his heart, and you can just hear his voice ringing out in the temple court in the glorious canticle we heard this morning:

Praise God who has come to set his people free. Praise God who has raised up for us a mighty savior. Praise God who secures for us His ancient promises of mercy and salvation. Praise God who has vanquished our fears and bought us as His own. Praise God who has given us a son, a son who shall prepare the way of The Lord, who will preach salvation from our sins by the tender mercies of God, a God who is coming among us even now like the awakening of the dawn, to shine upon our world, illumine our hearts, and guide our feet into the pathway of peace.

Good people, this book that I love so much, the Holy Bible is all about just a handful of truths. And Zechariah's story is our own, because we all share the same human condition. There has never been a single day in my life that I have not come to doubt something: to doubt myself, to doubt my faith, yes from time to time even to doubt my God. Because this is all part and parcel of the human condition. But, in those moments of doubt if we will just let The Lord strike us dumb for a moment, if we can just close our mouths, and open our hearts, and listen for the voice of The Lord, soon and then very soon, He comes. And our song of praise comes rolling off our hearts once again.

The main message of Colossians is one of the awesome power which is available to the fellowship of believers through our inheritance through The Christ. Yes, there is the eternal glory that awaits us in God's heavenly Kingdom. (See Col.1:4-5, 12) And both the Apostle Paul and John of Patmos refer to a state that awaits us in the here-after, when we shall actually share in the exalted glory of Our Lord. (See 2Tim.2:12; Rev. 20:4) But in the Epistle we heard from today, the *Letter to the Colossians*, Paul takes this concept of the glory we all share to a different level. At the beginning of this letter, Paul describes the power we are given through the faith in Christ even in this very present age, when he says, "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power..." (See Col.1:11a) In the very next chapter of Luke from which we heard this morning, the very last thing Jesus says to us in his resurrected form is to promise us that we are to be clothed in power from on high (See Lk.24:49), and he's not taking about the here-after either; he's speaking about the right here and the right now! The psalter is full of this witness to just what kind of power is available to the children of God. In Psalm 8 we read that God has made man just a little lower than the angels and crowned him with honor and glory. (See Ps. 8:5) In the Psalm you heard just a couple of weeks ago for All Saints Sunday, God, speaking through the pen of David declares "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.'" (Ps. 82:6a)

But then, I think we have to ask ourselves, "Why?" Why would The Lord God go to so much effort to pour out the awesome power of His Holy Spirit on us? So that we could perform celestial parlor tricks? Is it just to prove who's really boss? Is the objective of the awesome power of the Holy Spirit just to make clear to us who's really in charge down here? Isn't that taking an awful lot of trouble to manifest the timeless power of the Holy Spirit of God down here in this world, which is such a temporary place? Why go to that extreme to change the brief lives of mortal men, humans, when Scripture tells us clearly that we are here only for a single season and then, like the grass, wither away? (See Is.51:12) Why would God Almighty go to so much trouble over creatures whose lives are so very fleeting?

Well maybe, just maybe The Lord God is spending so much of his divine time and effort to impact and transform our fleeting, earthly lives with the immense power of the Holy Spirit because...you and I are in boot camp. Theologians such as N. T. Wright are only now beginning to write seriously about the fact that maybe, just maybe when you and I shuffle off this mortal coil, our real work is only just beginning. It's quite possible that this entire earthly life is nothing more than our training course for a role in the great, cosmic battle that is to be, that glorious final struggle when good does triumph over the powers of darkness.

Now, you may be wondering right now, at my house just what kind of mushrooms are they puttin' on the pizza! But I need to tell you that there is sound evidence, Biblical evidence that this cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil is no metaphor.

Not only does this battle take place, but it is already in progress, and has been in progress for thousands of years. It rages around us we sit here in this place today, although you cannot see it with human eyes or hear its clash and cry with mortal ears. Yet, the struggle is, even now in progress. (See 1Pet.5:8)

Today is Christ the King day, the last Sunday of the church year. And it is fitting that we heard of Christ's agony he suffered among us before we begin to set the scene for his incarnation with the contemplative Season of Advent. We've been focusing on the Thessalonian Correspondence over the last few Sundays in our Epistles. At the beginning of *2nd Thessalonians*, Paul talks of the day when Jesus will return *"to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed"* (2Thes.1:10) The word used for "testimony or witness" (see 2Thes.1:10) is actually *martu'reeon*. It's where we get our word 'Martyr.' Other places you'll find this word are in *Matthew* Chapter 10 when Jesus says, *"And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles."* (Mt.10:18) Mark uses this same word *martu'reeon* when Our Lord, warns us, *"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them."* (Mk.13:9) In *Luke*, Jesus assures us that before the end times, *"They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness."* (Lk.21:12-13)

The Church was formed in blood and fire, and that cosmic struggle between good and evil continues. We still make reference to this cosmic battle today, although we have shrouded it in metaphor to make it less disturbing to our "enlightened," secular minds. But Paul was under absolutely no illusion that there is this battle between good and evil on-going. In *2nd Corinthians* he clearly tells us, *"We do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds"* (2Cor.10:3b-4a). And even more clearly at the end of *Ephesians* he writes, *"For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* (Eph.6:12) No, it is difficult to read the Bible with any seriousness and come away with the conviction that the cosmic war between light and dark is only a metaphor. No, this struggle is ongoing. It is a very real battle in which you and I will have our own, powerful part to play.

In the final book of the Bible, in the 19th Chapter of *Revelation*, John of Patmos is permitted to glimpse the armies of heaven. And they are all clothed in the same fine, white linen of the Saints of God. And the battle, that last battle is so very clearly described, as is its victory. (See Rev.19:11-21) So, you see, I have come to believe that this present life is indeed, only our proving ground. We are to be tested here, and sooner or later, we will be sorely tested. But, as gold is refined by great fire, so are we being prepared for our own place in heavenly realms, being prepared for a place among the Saints of God, citizens of a Kingdom that shall never pass away.

JWB+ 11-10-16