

Angel Speak

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Bloor Street United Church – 4th Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2011

Reading: Luke 1. 5- 79

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But 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.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that

he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.'

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
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.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Those poor little angels from the Nativity scene – they keep falling off the stable. That's not part of the Christmas story as it is written here – and of course there are so many parts like that. When we speak of the Christmas Story, we are almost always talking about an amalgam of writings and legends and memories and folklore. The gospels are spliced together to make one story – Mary and Elizabeth and shepherds from Luke, Joseph and Herod and the Wise Men from Matthew. Then we weave in other stories too – a spider spinning a gossamer blanket, a drummer boy, a little brown robin fanning the embers in the stable to keep the baby warm, fanning until her breast turned red – those aren't in the Bible. But they fit.

Our own minds add special features too – remember the overweight shepherd that some people imagine when they sing 'round John virgin' in Silent Night? Or here is something I heard this week – think of a young boy listening to the story of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary, then the visit of Mary and Elizabeth [and in the usual shorter version there is no indication that there are two babies]. In his mind, 'the child leapt in her womb' becomes 'the child leapt *into* her

womb'. So *that* was how Jesus got there! He leapt! What a splendid picture of joyful energy, the sprightly vitality of the not-yet-born saviour. (Think of that the next time you see a painting of the pregnant Mary – that baby *leapt* into her womb!) So we all add and subtract and embellish in our way.

Some parts of the story get lost, too – we generally leave out the entire narrative that Bill read today about Zechariah. It is worth having a closer look at it though – it is full of information that the original listeners would have understood immediately, but is more obscure for us. As a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem, Zechariah would have been a person of some consequence. His wife Elizabeth, too, came from a priestly family – so we see that John the Baptist has a very good pedigree. These somewhat elite parents are told by the angel to raise the boy as a Nazirite, like Samson, and like that other miraculous baby, Samuel. In the Jewish tradition, a Nazirite is a person specially pledged to God – is to allow his hair to grow, is to avoid wine and alcohol, and dead bodies. So even if we see John the Baptist later as an eccentric loner, his origins are in the bosom of a complex and highly ritualized religion. He is a person of priestly family, living out a well-known tradition.

But back to the beginning. His father is on duty offering incense in the holy of holies, that most sacred space in the Temple, the most sacred space in the world for the Jews, when the angel Gabriel appears and addresses him. Even here, the promised baby is identified as a new Elijah, the one who will be seen just before the messiah comes. Part of a tradition.

Not surprisingly, Zechariah objects to this grand prophecy made by an angel, but he focuses on the mundane detail. “Can’t be, can’t be,” he grumbles, “we are too old”. And the angel strikes him dumb. It’s as if Gabriel is saying, if you don’t get this, if you cannot take it in, just shut up. Be quiet until you do get it. Afterward all the people in the Temple see that something overwhelming has happened to him while he was in that sacred space, but they don’t know what and he can’t tell them.

The more familiar part of the story unfolds then – the visit of the two expectant mothers, the wonderful song of Mary. And then when Elizabeth’s baby is born, Zechariah breaks with customary practice to call him John. In his months of silence, Zechariah *has* come to understand that something new is going on. His voice is restored and he too sings praise to a God of salvation.

It does seem that the Gospel-writer is trying to underline and draw our attention to the contrasts in the story. Silence and song. Old and young. Barren and

fruitful. The esteemed wife of an elderly priest in Jerusalem with an unmarried girl in the village. The elaborate Temple cult of Jewish antiquity with God's incarnation in a stable birth. And it seems that in each of these contrasts it is the old and established which is to give way to the new. It is the young that is to take precedence. As the choir sang, *God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.*

Interesting to see the role angels seem to play in this. The Greek and Hebrew scholars remind us that 'angel' means messenger. They bring news in these and other stories of the Christmas season. Angels appear not only to Zechariah and Mary, but to Joseph and to the shepherds in the fields, and to the Magi in their far-flung observatories. They bring news of a birth, news of a change of plan, news of a new way home. But they do more than bring news – on the one hand, they reassure, and on the other they precipitate action. It seems as if these messengers are always saying 'fear not'. Now we celebrate Christmas every December, but what has become a joyful annual festival 2000 years later began as something that made the original participants frightened. Fear not Zechariah, your prayer has been answered. Fear not Mary, you have found favour with God. Fear not, Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Fear not shepherds, for behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy.

The other thing the angels do is precipitate action. They give a nudge, they say – do what you never would have thought. Be amazed, have a baby, go to your cousin and sing with her, marry your beloved, name the child John, name the child Jesus, take your sheep and go to Bethlehem, and see this thing which the Lord has made known. When an angel speaks, something happens.

Perhaps down through the centuries, through the splicing and embroidery and elisions in the story, through the remembered voices of grandparents and the clear tones of our Sunday school class, through the TV specials and the carols we sing, perhaps in all that, we can hear angels speak also to us. Living as we do, in the poignancy of the Christmas season, remembering our personal struggles, our injuries and our longings, dismayed and demoralized by the overwhelming needs of the world, the angels still speak. Fear not, they say. Your sorrow is known. And there is good news.

Perhaps when angels speak, they say to us, as to Zechariah, be silent. You don't know the whole story. This good news is unlikely. Not what you expect. This

good news is to be found in the smallest, meanest place. This good news is to be heard in the night.

Be silent for a time.

And then come to Bethlehem and sing glory. Amen.