

Gifts Given

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

As we've heard, the theme for the fourth week of Advent is *love* and how love is expressed. Typically on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we tend to focus on the individual stories of key figures in our nativity story. Figures like Mary and Joseph. We also include Elizabeth and Zechariah, who we have heard about today. In all of these stories, these people were visited by an angel who brought them a message about the gift that God was about to give them and what it meant. And, like Zechariah, one's first reaction to an angel appearing is fear, to which the response from the angel is always, "Do not be afraid", and so I hope today that you will hear those words above all else. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of what God is calling each and every one of you to do.

Luke's Gospel, unlike Mark and Matthew and John, wants to emphasize the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. This is why we get this story at this time of year about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were descendants of Aaron, who was the cousin of Moses, who helped to free the Hebrew people from slavery. Elizabeth – like some of her ancestors, like Sarah who was the wife of Abraham, or Rebekah who was the wife of Isaac – were barren. Were not able to conceive a child. Elizabeth and Sarah were both – as it is described in the scriptures – as *advanced in age*, so it didn't seem possible, until they heard the good news that they would have a child. God let them know that they would have a child. The child would play a significant role in carrying out God's ministry in the world.

Now, the verses of scripture that we missed today in the passage was about Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest, and back in those days, they would draw lots. Somebody in one of the commentaries described this as "jury duty". Where they would cast lots, pull one out, and you would be the person who would have the

honour of going to the temple and caring for it for a week. That's what Zechariah was asked to do and his specific role was to keep the incense burning in the temple. While he was there, the angel appeared to him and told him, "Your wife, who is advanced in age, who hasn't been able to bear a child, *will* bear" actually said, "Really? Is that possible??" It was in his doubt – and this is the part we didn't hear – God stopped him from being able to speak. The people outside the temple were waiting for Zechariah, knowing that this was taking longer than normal. When he came out, he wasn't able to tell them what happened. So he was trying to motion and communicate with them, and they were all like, "Ohh, something special happened to you. You clearly had a vision." It wasn't until later we hear that once the child was born – and I love this part – they questioned his wife Elizabeth, "Why are you calling him John? You don't have any Johns in your family." Again, going back to the names and how important that was. It wasn't until Zechariah was given something to write on when he told everyone that no, his name was not to be Zechariah. This child's name is to be John. *Gracious gift*. Gift from God. In that moment, his voice was returned. In that moment, he was able to speak the good news of this amazing thing that happened, and what was to come, as we hear more in the scripture.

So, over the season of Advent, we have been exploring different love languages that people have, and different ways that express love. We've focused on words of affirmation. Some people are very good at giving words of affirmation and telling people why we love them. Some of us are more about spending quality time with the people we love. We have also talked about acts of service. Helping people out in their times of need or to make their life a little easier. The scripture this morning, though, I believe talks about gift giving. The act of giving gifts. This time of year is very stressful for people whose language this is not. (I'm number one on that list.) Gift giving; for people with gifts as a love language, it is the act of giving a gift that serves as a gesture of affection and care. Because it shows the person that you are thinking about them when they were not with you. You wanted to find a way to make them smile, make them feel good. The gift also becomes a physical token memorializing a moment, experience, or a feeling. In other words, it's less about the specific thing that was given and more about what it symbolizes. So take a moment to think about

a gift that somebody gave you that is really meaningful to you, that you still have, that reminds you of that moment.

In this passage today, we read that God gave the gift of a child to Elizabeth and Zechariah. One of the five languages of God is gift giving. What a precious gift that would be. Their child would be the one that would forge the way for Jesus to make ready the path for the Chosen One of God to come. As it says in Zechariah's prophecy in verse 76, "And you, child" – so speaking about John – "will be called the prophet of the most high. You will go before the Lord to prepare His ways. To give knowledge of salvation to his people by forgiving 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." John the Baptist would go before the Chosen One of God, who we know to be Jesus, to prepare the way. John began to baptize people with water, but also indicating that Jesus would come, and Jesus would baptize not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit, so that we would all be surrounded by the love of God. John, in essence, is called by God to lead people onto the path that is the light. We have heard that Jesus is the light of the world.

What I love about the services on Christmas Eve is that we hear of the story of Jesus' birth, and we literally, symbolically move from darkness into light. We come in the evening and the lights are turned down. At the end of the service, we pass the light of Christ. And slowly but surely, this place is illumined. The light of Christ shines upon all of us. That is the way we will get to peace. The birth of Jesus that we will witness tonight is a gift from God for all people. For all people to be redeemed. It is the gift of redemption through the word of God made flesh, brought to earth in human form. God's love is incarnate in the baby that Mary would give birth to in Bethlehem.

The word redeem is defined as: "To be free from what harms or change for the better." In *A Song of Faith*, which is one of the most recent statements of faith for the United Church of Canada, we say this: "We sing of Jesus, a Jew born to a woman in poverty, in a time of social upheaval and political oppression. He knew human joy and sorrow, and so filled with the Holy Spirit was he that in him, people experienced the presence of God among them. We sing praise to

God incarnate.” Like that day of Jesus’ birth so long ago, we too are living in times of social upheaval. Of political oppression in this world.

There is an image going around that is very profound, and is making its way across the world, of a church that has staged the nativity scene where Jesus is amongst the rubble of the destruction that has happened in the Gaza strip. Jesus comes to bring us peace. We will talk about how he is called the Prince of Peace. Perhaps, like Zechariah, we have lost the words. We have lost our voice because we doubt whether the world will ever change. Will people ever change? Will peace ever come on earth? Perhaps we are listening to too much of the news, too much of the secular voice in this world, and not listening to the message of God and the prophecy of what is to come. Perhaps when we hear the story of Jesus’ birth again tonight and the meaning of this gift of love given to all humanity, we too will find our voice like Zechariah, stand up against oppression, seek peace and express our love for all people unconditionally. With Jesus comes redemption. So how will God’s love redeem each and every one of us? How will it set us free from what harms us? How will it set others free from harm?

We will be joining in the ritual of communion, which is also a physical act to remind us of God’s love expressed that we are redeemed through Jesus providing us with the body and the blood. The wine and the bread, to remind us of all that Jesus does for us. So may this Christmas remind us of the call to accept the gift of redemption, and then be part of the change in this world to bring about peace expressed through our unconditional love. May it be so. Amen.