

Zechariah's Great Gift (Advent Lunch Meditation) **Luke 1:5-22**
St Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 1st Wednesday of Advent (December 3,) 2014

⁵ 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. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ 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.**" ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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."

²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² 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.

One of the secrets for successful Advent Preparation for the birth of Christ in our lives is found in scripture. I know that the CEO's of the Church (Christmas Easter Only's) may complain that whenever they come to church, all they hear are the same scriptures and the same songs – I contend that there can be great benefit to the repetition of the scriptures – for the continuing unfolding of God's revelation through words we have heard again and again.

For example in this Gospel we just heard, I used to wonder why Zechariah's "**How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years**" got him a sentence of being mute, and Mary's words of "**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**" got her blessed.

But, I don't think today the way I used to. Now, I realize that Zechariah, too, was blessed. And I would encourage us to drink in some of that same blessing.

This past Sunday we looked at Scrooge's first name as one key to a good Advent preparation. The Ebenezer Stone, we learned from 1 Samuel 7 was where the prophet Samuel erected a large stone in the midst of the Hebrews, and called it an EBENEZER stone.

The purpose of the EBENEZER was to remind people of the time when God turned their fortunes around – when God gave them a fresh start – when God overcame their fears and provided them HOPE.

And I suggested that we each take time to use the lit Christmas tree, as an Ebenezer reaching from up there to down here, and **to remember what God has done, and to expect a fresh start that comes not from our own efforts.**

Let me suggest now that the **Gift of Zechariah** is a SECOND KEY to an effective Advent Preparation – as **we seek to beautify our souls as much as we seek to beautify our houses with cleaning and decorating.**

The Zechariah Gift is that of SOLITUDE and SILENCE.

Don't confuse SOLITUDE with the sadness during this season known as LONELINESS. Loneliness is a deprivation which FOCUSES ON LOSS. Solitude, on the other hand, is an entry into, and coming home to, our very deepest being.

One of the failures of the morality that the world attempts to teach is that it fails to teach us that the **one of the greatest sins is the un-lived life.** It was 4th century Saint Irenaeus who taught Christians then and today that **the glory of God is the human life fully alive.**

One of the saddest things a pastor experiences is to sit beside the person dying, whose final moments are filled with REGRET for all the things that they did not do, because they kept postponing them until “the right time.”

SOLITUDE helps us get in touch with the inner spark that teaches us from within what we most need in life. Zechariah was gifted in this way. (And, BTW, nine months later this old man became a father.)

The GIFT OF SOLITUDE is accompanied by its counterpart: the gift of SILENCE.

Zechariah was given this gift. Even though he may not have realized what a gift it was, at first – and it may have seemed like punishment, at first – I am absolutely certain he began to realize what a gift it was not very long into the following 9 months.

Silence frees us from the vapid nature of so much of our conversation. Recently deceased Celtic pastor, poet, and mystic John O’Donohue observed – **and I invite you to test his observation against your own life** – he observed that almost all of our human conversation is “*surface narrative*” or “*catalogue narrative*” in which people describe themselves and their lives only in terms of their outer work or of the life program that they are doing.

Such conversation is not intrinsically bad nor evil – it’s just that such talking rarely renews our soul, nor prepares us, for the birth of Christ in our lives.

O’Donohue continues in his book *Anam Cara* (Gaelic for “Soul Friend”) that ***one of the primary reasons people today are so stressed in their lives is not because they are doing stressful things, but because they leave so little room for silence.***

Silence is one of the keys to restoration to the “image of God” in which we were created.

13th/14th century preacher and mystic Meister Eckhart said: ***Nothing is so like God as Silence.*** He also wrote: ***In Silence God’s love burns the hottest.***

And contemporary priest and spiritualist Thomas Keating puts it like this: ***Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation.***

Within the next few days, a banner will reappear outside of Saint Marks, up high on the columns of the front entrance, with the words of earlier quoted Saint Irenaeus. (They were also said by Saint Athanasius.)

At Christmas, God became human so that we can become divine.

This was what God intended when God made us in God's Image. And then God put on human flesh so that we could see just how that looks; so we to can become our potential.

Much of the world's morality teaches us that we need to reform our lives by fitting and squeezing them into some moral mold that will make us acceptable to God.

The Gift of Zechariah – **SOLITUDE AND SILENCE** – **connects us with the God that is already inside us, that wants us to live the full life that is God's great Glory, to accept and live into the divinity, which we already possess.**

Contemporary Celtic Bard Van Morrison sings: **If you live the life you love, you will receive the blessing from above.**

Sometimes, in so many of our lives, we experience a great famine of the Advent Virtues – **Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love** – because we are not living the life that our individual life was created to live – because we are trying to merely do what other people are doing, or trying to squeeze our life into so many others' expectations. This "forced living" takes us out of rhythm with the "**sacred signature and sacred light of our own individual nature. The shape of each soul is different.**" (ODonohue, *Anam Cara*)

My prayer for thee and for me is that we invest time each day during this Holy Advent Preparation to (1) return to YOUR LIT CHRISTMAS TREE EBENEZER as a reminder of **what God has done, and as a reminder of the fresh start that God**

intends for **OUR individual life, not from our working to squeeze our life into somebody else's mold.**

And (2), my prayer is that you and I daily **spend time wrapped in the Gift of Zechariah – in SOLITUDE AND SILENCE – where we are actually closest to the God who is within ...** and there hear again in God's Language of Silence this blessing:

May you recognize in your life the Presence and Power and Light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone, but that your soul, in its brightness and belonging, connects you intimately with the Rhythm of the Universe.

May you learn to see yourself with the same delight and pride and happiness with which God sees you in every moment.

And then, receiving this blessing, may our response be like Mary's: **I am indeed a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold; let it be unto me according to your word.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.