Advent: Laying the Foundation

(with Peace)

Second Sunday of Advent

*Luke 1:57-88 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa December 5, 2021*

I have a lengthy introduction before reading this morning’s Gospel lesson. It will help us all better understand what’s going on in Luke’s gospel. First, as I mentioned at the beginning of last week’s sermon on the First Sunday of Advent, the overarching theme for this year’s season of Advent is called *Close to Home*. It’s a resource from a group called, *A Sanctified Art*, recently formed by several female Presbyterian pastors, elders, and lay leaders.

When something hits close to home, there’s an emotional connection that affects us because it’s something that we can closely relate to on a personal level. As we journey through the season of Advent, guided by the scripture passages selected for each Sunday, we will be looking for and exploring those things that hit close to home for us. **Last week we explored the concept of being homesick for any number of things, yet with hope as we look for signs of God’s Sacred Presence engaged in and with our homesick world.** Today, we look at what it means to lay a foundation, with the hope of connecting that with the theme of our second Advent Wreath Candle of Peace.

Just a few words, now, about the Gospel of Luke, which will be the lectionary’s primary gospel focus throughout the coming year. During the season of Advent back in 2015, six years ago, each of the four Sundays focused on the meaning of Advent from the perspective of each of the four gospel writers, in the order in which they were written: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. The author of the Gospel of Luke, who also authored of the Book of Acts, wrote around the same time as Matthew. While there are many similarities, there are also important differences in how each of these two authors begin their gospel and tell the narrative story of the birth of Jesus. But I won’t be going into that this morning.

Luke alone begins with an extensive storyline in Jesus’ birth narrative that includes an old priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah, while he is serving in the temple, that even in their old age they will give birth to a son, and he is to be named John, later becoming John the Baptist. Disbelieving the angel’s revelation, Zechariah is struck mute, unable to speak until these things came to pass. Elizabeth does indeed conceive. During her sixth month, the angel Gabriel visits Mary with the prophesy that she would conceive a child and name him Jesus. Mary goes with haste to visit Elizabeth, who is most often referred to as her cousin, even though the scriptures only say she is a kindred or relative. When Mary enters the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. Luke then presents Mary’s song of praise, often known as the Magnificat.

It is at this point when we reach the scripture passage selected by those who wrote this year’s Advent resource, Luke 1:57-80.

**Luke 1:57-80**

57Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” 61They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” 62Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. 64Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

65Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

67Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” 80The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Now, I realize that up to this point this all sounds more like a Bible Study book report than a sermon. And I wouldn’t be surprised if many of you are thinking to yourself: that’s all kind interesting and stuff, **but what difference does it really make to us here and now?** Here’s how the authors of this resource answer that question.

In the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, we see the foundation of what is to come. We see how interwoven his story is with Jesus’ origin story. When Zechariah regains his voice, his imagination is also restored. He offers deep praise for God’s tender mercy, and casts a hopeful vision for his own child. He sings blessings into John’s being. This lays the foundation for John’s life. In turn, John will go on to prepare the way for Jesus who will guide us all in the way of peace. In this week, we focus on making space—in our lives and our imaginations—for God’s blessings to break through.

I must admit that I’ve never paid much attention to what is named “Zechariah’s Prophecy”, or more commonly, the “Song of Zechariah”, and in some traditions the *Benedictus*. Perhaps that’s because this passage is not selected as an assigned reading by the lectionary. Therefore, **I hadn’t realized the tenderness and meaning of a parent pronouncing a blessing over a newborn child.** This blessing laid the foundation for their relationship, and laid the foundation for the child as he grew and lived into his vocation as John the Baptist.

Particularly moving and inspiring is the closing of Zechariah’s blessing, “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” (Luke 1:78-79). **“…to guide our feet into the way of peace.”** Resource commentator Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri reflects:

Having lost his voice for his initial disbelief, Zechariah regains it just in time to praise God for God’s mercy and to pronounce a blessing, a prophecy, to his son that would set the tone for John’s life and ministry. While the neighbors and relatives gossiped about the miraculous circumstances of John’s birth—circumstances that amazed as much as frightened them—they also worried, wondering, “What then will this child become?” (v. 66). Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit and knowing his son would become the “prophet of the Most High,” (v. 76) **spoke words of vision to a newborn that grew strong in spirit and helped lay the foundation into the way of peace**.

This is our connection point with this passage of scripture. “**In building God’s kin-dom, let us remember there is power in the words that we speak, to anyone, but especially to our young ones as we lay the foundation for their spiritual homes**… May we cast this vision of kin-dom and bless others with words and acts of love, hope, and mercy. May these words and acts strengthen our collective spirits and guide us all into the way of peace—guide us all home.” Here, then, are some questions to reflect upon this week.

* What are the words, blessings, and actions that have laid the foundation for your life?
* Who helped lay a foundation of faith for you?
* How are you doing this for others?
* What are the specific acts that build a foundation of love and peace?
* In these times of transition and change, what are the foundations we can claim and hold onto as this community of faith, College Hill?

As I closed last Sunday’s sermon, I want to close this one with another poem, written by resource poet the Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed. It’s entitled, “Words for the Beginning.” **Like Zechariah’s blessing, these are words spoken by a parent to a newborn child.**

**WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING**

By Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed - Sanctifiedart.org

If I could give you words for the very beginning—

for the stretches
and the yawns,

and the opening of eyes,
for the first hiccups,
and the first smiles,
and the first purse of your lips,

I would say,

“Oh, dear child, how you are loved.”

But the thing about love
is you can’t stop there,
so I would go on to say,
“You are strong,
stronger than you think.
And you are not alone—
look at these parents who adore you
and these doctors and nurses fighting for you.

And you are enough, already enough.

You haven’t done anything yet.

You’ve just been here,

breathing,
sleeping,

and already, you are enough.

And then I might say,
“This world is a mess,
but it is your home,

and you can make it better,
so always try to make it better.

And maybe most important of all:

there is a love
that is bigger than my understanding,

that moves through this world,

and I call that love God.

And that love is here,

here in this room,
and that love knows

your name by heart.”

Those are the words I would say to you
as you stretch and yawn and open your eyes

on the very first morning
of your very first day.
Let that be your foundation,
like Zechariah did for John.
Let love be your beginning.

This is my blessing for the children of this community of faith, and children everywhere. And though we are not newborns, these are my words of blessing to all of us: **You are enough. Let love be your beginning. And, may your feet be guided in the way of peace.**

Amen.