

“God’s Promise: Wilderness Spirit” (Sermon by Oby Ballinger)
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 22, 2019

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

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 favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

...Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors 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 neighbors, 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 favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior 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.” The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

I've been reading lately about a new form of spiritual community that gathers for worship in open fields or a stand of forest trees. People assemble outdoors at a given time and share in opening liturgy. In place of a sermon, people are given time to wander in their surroundings, to explore, meditate, and learn from their observations. Brought back together by a cowbell, they share reflections on what they see. Some communities gather monthly, and others weekly, no matter the weather. This movement trusts that there is wisdom and worth in wildness. Its historical precedents go at least as far back as biblical times.

This story from Luke's gospel starts in the temple, but ends out in the wilderness. Zechariah and Elizabeth are religious insiders, the equivalent of "pastor's kids" going back for generations on either side. Zechariah is serving as a priest at the Jerusalem temple when he gets a lifetime opportunity to enter the most sacred part of the shrine and offer incense to God there. The Holiest-of-Holies was out of sight and off-limits to everyday people, unless you were a male Jewish priest, and even then you could only do it once. Such caution was because everyone knew the Temple was God's address, and the Holiest-of-Holies was God's living room. You don't just waltz into the presence of God and expect to come out unscathed.

Except, Zechariah seems to have forgotten this wild hazard at the heart of temple spirituality. When he encounters an angel in just the place you would expect to find one, Zechariah asks for proof of the angel's prophecy that he and his old wife would have a child. Has his spirituality been so domesticated over the years that he's grown numb to the possibility that the living God could find him? As a consequence, he loses the ability to finish his job, to give the formal priestly benediction at the end of the ritual, or to speak at all for months on end. Zechariah and Elizabeth enter a mute strangeness—she growing pregnant after she had given up hope in old age, and he learning to live with a disability that sequesters him at home. When your family is touched by divine wildness, life may be changed forever.

We're acquainted with the child born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. In the very last verse, we read that "the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." We know this child in his adult form: John the Baptist. That name conjures up rough living on the margins of society, with stern preaching, camel's hair clothing, and a diet of locusts. I forget the temple origins of John the Baptist's story because the wilderness has so thoroughly shaped him by the time he appears publicly to proclaim the coming of Jesus. Yet the experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth resonates with people of God throughout the Bible and up to our own day. Prophets like Elijah, Jesus himself, and Mary his mother—all their stories begin with isolation far from home, and involve real or metaphysical wilderness. The gospel takes root outside of establishment places.

We do well to remember this as we sing Christmas carols so familiar we might take them for granted. "Swiftly winging, angels singing" may not be the sweet cherubic encounter that Hallmark has taught us to expect. "Tidings of a Gospel true" includes that we may expect to be pushed out from familiar and domestic things into the strange wilderness where God can work with us anew. Novelist Annie Dillard reminds us that this could happen when we're least expecting it, while at prayer in the middle of worship like Zechariah. She asks, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ...It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

If you feel altogether out of sorts in this season, or if the disorienting wilderness of grief, a diagnosis, family chaos, or world news has left you reeling, you are in good company this Advent season. Despite a conventional expectation for "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" in our own versions of the temple this season, Scripture suggests that tumult is more likely in the presence of the living God. Annie Dillard writes elsewhere that "No one escapes the wilderness on the way to the promised land." As we prepare for the mysterious arrival of God in human flesh on Christmas Eve, may we be like the child John in the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, growing "strong in spirit" not despite the wilderness, but because of it. Amen.