

It Takes a Village
Luke 1:5-13, 57-80

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Zechariah is a priest serving his rotation at the Temple. At this time, the priests were divided into 24 groups who each served in the temple for a week at a time, twice a year. We're told Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are both from priestly families and they are good, righteous people. They follow the law. They're also old and have no children.

The custom is for the priests to cast lots for the particular jobs that need to be done and this time it falls on Zechariah to enter the Holy of Holies and offer incense. This is a big deal. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to serve the Lord in the holiest place in the Temple. We can imagine Zechariah enters with some trepidation!

We can also imagine Zechariah's trepidation turns to outright fear when he sees the angelic being standing next to the altar. Oh my! Oh no! But before Zechariah can even squawk, the angel says, "Do not be afraid."

This is important. The very first words spoken in Luke's Gospel are "Do not be afraid." We'll hear them again, tonight, when the angels speak to the shepherds. "Do not be afraid."

The angel reassures Zechariah and tells him his prayers are answered. Elizabeth will bear a son and he is to name him John.

Our text skips a bit here and that's OK, but let me fill in one detail. The angel explains that John will call people to repent, to turn back to God. Zechariah then questions the angel. 'How will I know this is true? How do I know you're not deceiving me?' The angel answers that Zechariah will be mute, unable to speak, until the son is born.

And so, we skip ahead 9 months and a baby is born. Everyone is thrilled. At the right time, they come to name him. This is a community event! It's not just Zechariah and Elizabeth's business. A lot of people are involved.

The people want to name the child Zechariah, after his father. This was the usual thing to do. Not a surprise.

But then, something amazing happens. Elizabeth, who hasn't spoken a word, jumps in and says, "No; he is to be called John!" Now, how did she know that? Did Zechariah tell her? Couldn't have. Zechariah is mute. Did he write it down for her? Maybe, but that assumes Elizabeth can read. I would be surprised if a woman, even of her status, would be literate. Did the angel whisper in her ear? We don't know, the text doesn't say.

What we do know is this woman, this marginal person, speaks up and corrects the power people. Her word is "No." Her act is an act of defiance. Here is a woman, pushing the people to go against custom, doing what her son will do, bringing the people back into line with God's will. We don't know if she felt afraid, but we do know she did what needed to be done.

Some of you, I'm sure, also know about being ignored, suppressed, discounted. But Elizabeth doesn't let that stop her. She jumps in and says, "No; he is to be called John."

Naturally, the people won't take her word for it. They have to ask Zechariah, who is literate and who writes down what his wife just said. "His name is John." And then, finally, Zechariah can speak. And when he does, he praises God.

If you've listened to many of my sermons, you know one of the things I like to do is ask where we see ourselves in the text. Where are you, where are we, where is our church, in this story? Are we Zechariah, quietly standing by while other people are getting on with our business? Are we the crowd, trying to do the right thing but getting it hopelessly wrong?

Are we, perhaps, Elizabeth? Living a godly life, acting as we're supposed to, but still being ignored, marginalized, suppressed? If so, I beg you speak up. Call us to the way we should go. Bring us God's word. Do **not** be afraid.

I pray that, at least to some extent, we all identify with John. John's calling is our calling. Both as individuals and as a church we point the way to the Messiah, the Prince of Peace. We lead people to Jesus.

If you identify with John, do not be afraid. You are not alone. Prophets are born and raised in community. They are recognized and empowered by community.

In John's case, it took Zechariah, fulfilling his priestly duty and quietly praying for a child.

It took the crowd, intent on giving John the wrong name but equally intent on honoring God and Zechariah.

And it took Elizabeth. Honorable, decent, God-fearing Elizabeth, always in the background, but boldly stepping in and correcting the authorities. Bringing them back to God's path.

Beloved, it takes a village to share the good news of God's love. Whatever your part – John, Zechariah, the crowd, Elizabeth – whatever your part, do it well. And do not be afraid. God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.