

Bible readings

Isaiah 54:1-10

54 “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in labour!

For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her who is married,” says the LORD.

² “Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.

³ For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
and your offspring will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities.

⁴ “Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

⁵ For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.

⁶ For the LORD has called you
like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God.

⁷ For a brief moment I deserted you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.

⁸ In overflowing anger for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,”
says the LORD, your Redeemer.

⁹ “This is like the days of Noah to me:
as I swore that the waters of Noah
should no more go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you,
and will not rebuke you.

¹⁰ For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,”
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

Luke 1:57-80

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."
⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

Sermon John, is his name.

What a joy when new life comes into a family; when we welcome a new born baby. A joy for the parents, grandparents, all family and friends.

And then for them to hear the name or names that the child has been given. It's all part of that delight.

On this first Advent Sunday, we are drawn in exactly the celebration of the birth of a new born baby.

But it's not really an occasion we can identify with for it says that it is the eight day. The eight day is the day that a new born baby boy is circumcised. A Jewish baby boy. What that means, is that the child is taken; drawn into God's covenant.

When that takes place; when blood flows, that is brought about by circumcision, that blood points to Christ's blood on Golgotha. This ritual is rooted in the story of Abraham, where God says to Abraham,

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. (Genesis 17:10-13)

Elizabeth and Zacharias practise the rules of the covenant with God, as Mary and Joseph did when Jesus was born.

Something else happens on that eight day. The child is given its name. And that happens here, in Elizabeth's and Zachariah's house. It's a full house, family, friends, neighbours are all there. And a debate begins. A debate begins, for all those who form the community in which this child is born, want to give it the name Zachariah, after its dad, according to patriarchal customs.

But what these people do not know is that this child had been given its name already, by God. This takes us to the moment that the old priest Zachariah was visited by an angel, who brought him the good news that he and Elizabeth, in their old age, would become parents of a boy.

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. (Luke 1:8-13)

Here we have it. A biblical fact: God Himself had named the child. The name of Zachariah's and Elisabeth's child was going to be John, meaning: *graced by God*. And that was particularly so in the case of Elizabeth and Zachariah, as they had given up the hope that they would ever become parents, due to Elizabeth's barrenness.

But nobody knew of course that God Himself had established that name. And that brings about debate. As it always does: what God does in His wisdom, according to

His plan, brings about debate; conflict. Conflicts that bring to the surface the basic principle of faith: human thinking vs God's thinking

Here we see an illustration of Isaiah's words:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55: 8)*

It is Elizabeth who intervenes. She tells the people that the name of the boy is not Zachariah, but John. Well, she has to speak for Zachariah cannot. Why? Because Zachariah was made silent; unable to speak, because he did not believe the angel's words of God, that Elizabeth was going to bear a son:

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." (Luke 1:18-20)

So, where does it leave Zachariah the priest now, now the child has been born...? It leaves Him in the solid promise that was given by God, and was kept by God:

*you will be silent and unable to speak **until** the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time (Luke 1:20)*

Zachariah was left out of the debate, while he was the one; the only one who had heard God's promise and the name giving of his son.

Zachariah had been isolated in the darkness of his unbelief during the months of Elizabeth's pregnancy until...until he confirms in writing God's will to call this child John.

And so God kept His promise, while going His way, through the thoughts and values that people had. Writing down the name John, Zachariah is back to where he should have been when the messenger of God spoke to him; when he was given the good news that he was going to be a father. During the time of his silence, Zachariah had to learn. In silence, he faced where he was in his faith.

While we cannot identify with the celebration on the eighth day of the new born baby of the elderly couple, Zachariah's unbelief is something we can identify with. Like Zachariah the priest, we too need God's intervention to bring us back to faith, in the times of our unbelief.

They say: love makes blind. But the love for God and our faith in Him as responses to His love and faithfulness to us, make neither blind nor deaf. They do the opposite, for they take away barriers that we are not able to take away ourselves.

With regaining his speech, Zachariah's blindness for what God can do and promised to do, was taken away.

It shows that God's grace can only be received, not worked for, when we are what we don't want to be: vulnerable. A vulnerability God Himself chose for, when He presented Himself as new born baby; as Christ on the cross, being scoffed, ripped off his dignity.

When the people in Zachariah's and Elisabeth's house ask

'What will then this child be'(Luke 1: 66)

Zachariah answers through a prophecy, filled with God's spirit. Words that go back into Israel's story with God, back to Abraham.

Zachariah's son John was going to prepare the way for the expected Messiah. That was God's plan, and that was what happened.

God's plans continue to happen, in His way, in His time

Amen