

**“Strange Places: Barrenness”  
First Sunday of Advent**

**Luke 1:5-25  
November 27, 2011**

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*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 favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’*

“Stables, stables and mangers: in very strange places is God to be found.” So begins the telling of the Christmas story that our two choirs will share with us on the last Sunday of Advent this year. The Christmas cantata that the Senior and Junior Choirs are working hard on is called, “Strange Places,” a reminder of the very odd place, indeed, that God comes to meet us, to be with us, face to face and flesh to flesh.

Take, for example, the story Luke’s gospel begins with. Although we might want to rush

to the nativity story, Luke delays us, preparing us with the story of another nativity. First, we must encounter Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the strange place they found God, or rather, God found them.

Zechariah was a priest, and his wife Elizabeth was a distant relation of Mary. Both descended from priestly families, they have lived a long time together, but not been able to bear children. So they lived their lives in service not to a family but to God, through priestly service, living out in the countryside with the rest of their section and coming up to Jerusalem to serve at the Temple regularly.

And when Zechariah's section was called up to Jerusalem, the priests cast lots as usual to see who would do the various jobs required. This time, Zechariah was chosen by God to enter the sanctuary, the court closest to the Holy of Holies, where God's presence is the strongest. To enter the holy sanctuary, to burn the incense on the holy altar that would carry all the people's prayers and hopes up to God was a great privilege and an intimidating honour, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and offering.

So you can imagine Zechariah's shock and terror when a figure appeared before him, in the midst of this mysterious and awe-filled and just slightly frightening moment. I suppose that's why the figure began by saying, "Do not be afraid". But of course, that wasn't all he...it...said. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." And what prayer was that? At the beginning of his marriage he prayed, I assume, as every young married man did, for many fine, healthy children. But it had been a long time since that had even been a possibility. They had stopped praying that prayer long ago, become resigned to their lot in life.

But God is not willing to leave them to their resignation. "Your prayer has been heard," says the messenger. Yes, that prayer. It was going to happen. His wife Elizabeth is going to bear a child...a son. And it was such a sure thing, the angel said, that the miracle already had a name: John. Then he said such amazing and glorious things about this child, their son...that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit...that he would turn many people of Israel back to the Lord our God...that he would be a prophet like the ones of old, a prophet like Elijah...calling parents to their children...calling the disobedient back to the righteous ways of God. He even said, their son would prepare the people of Israel for their Messiah, their anointed one, their Lord.

Of course Zechariah asked him, "How? After all these years...how can I possibly believe you? How will I know that this is so?" And the angel answered simply by saying, "I am Gabriel." Gabriel, the name that means, "strength of God". Then, for doubting the good news, the angel told Zechariah that he would become mute, unable to speak, until the time their son is born. Then he was gone.

Imagine bursting with a vision, with news both exhilarating and terrifying, exciting yet impossible, and not being able to share it. Poor Zechariah, struggling to understand what it means, how to respond, how to participate in it, without being able to talk about it for months. For Zechariah would have had to wrestle to know what it meant, especially the part about their son being a prophet of "the Messiah".

Everyone was waiting with great expectation for this "Messiah". There was a fervour in

people's conversations and hopes, a yearning for "the day of the Lord," a time when the world as it is now would come to an end, and God would change everything by sending a Messiah. A Messiah who would lead their people into a new world of righteousness, of obedience to God, of victory over their enemies. A Messiah like their great king David, who was a true favoured son of Israel, and whose kingdom, God had promised, would have no end.

But there was no agreement about what this Messiah would be like, or what he would do. Some were convinced the Messiah would come with power and might, with avenging armies to crush the Romans, who had made life so difficult for them, as imagined by the prophet Zephaniah: "Shout, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel...The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory!"

Yet others repeated the visions of the prophet Isaiah, with hope and expectation: "out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Mighty warrior or maker of peace? Whichever this Messiah would be, the people of Israel, of Zechariah and Elizabeth knew they needed one desperately, to liberate them from the oppression they lived at the hands of the Roman occupiers. How was Zechariah to know what exactly would happen; how exactly God would act? He wasn't to know...he was simply to receive the unexpected and impossible new thing God was doing in his life, and Elizabeth's, and his community, and the world.

Well, it's been a long time since Zechariah went into the Temple...over 2,000 years. Like Zechariah, we have been waiting a long time for our prayers to be heard. "O come, O come, Emmanuel," we sing each and every year. Bring the kingdom of justice and peace to the earth. And there are prayers that we've said in our own hearts, year after year, whatever they may be, waiting for God to answer. It is hard, sometimes, to know what to answer when people ask us where God is: "How will we know that this is so?" Have faith? Be patient? It's all in God's time? Sometimes those words are hard for others, and even for us, to believe.

No wonder Zechariah found it hard to believe. We find it hard to believe, too, don't we? It is hard to conceive of a future that is radically different from the present. It is difficult to imagine that God will do something new for us, for the community, for the world, when we have known so much disappointment and loss, when we have had to become resigned to the way things are.

The word for that is barrenness. There was a time when it referred to a childless woman, like Elizabeth, in a patriarchal culture that valued women because of the children they could bear. But I think this is also a story about other kinds of barrenness, Zechariah's and our own. The barrenness of an empty imagination, a lack of spirit and hope. A difficulty in believing that God will act, and a cynicism about the possibility of our own actions having any kind of difference in the world.

And, it is a story of the strange ways and places God appears to create something brand

new in the world, in our hearts, in our lives. The strange and seemingly impossible places that God is found; places in the mind and heart and soul, as well as places in the physical world.

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, God is found in the midst of barrenness, of the emptiness of hopes long since disappointed, of the resignation of getting by and making do, of adjusting to “it is what is.” Yet God is not willing to leave them, or us, to our resignation or our cynicism. For right in the middle of the bleakness and the emptiness, in the face of the dry and dead hopes, the dreams that are buried and have no more life to give, there, God comes. There, God meets us, to create in us a future that is entirely new.

So, I invite you this Advent, to make the time to find God in the barrenness, or perhaps, to allow God to find you. Zechariah gives us a good example of how to do so. He spends time in worship, for one thing, opening himself to the mystery that is God. Our Sunday morning worship themes will help open us up to God’s presence, as well as special services like the Choir’s presentation of Vivaldi’s *Gloria*, and our gentle healing service, “When Christmas is Tough”.

For another thing, Zechariah gives himself to service, giving to the wider community through his prayers. For us, perhaps we will give ourselves through serving and enjoying dinner together with the community at First United Church, or through other ways to celebrate Christmas there, or through supporting our Christmas gifts and party at St. Elizabeth Home.

And of course, Zechariah spends time in silence, and lots of it! So maybe this is the year that you will spend ten minutes in silence in the morning, asking for God to show herself to you in the day ahead, or fifteen minutes with a lit candle before bedtime, asking God to show you where he is at work, making new life in the midst of your daily routine.

However we can open ourselves to it, I pray that for each of us, this Advent can be a time to see again the strange places that God is found, in the places and situations and feelings we least expect and that seem most impossible. May it be so! Amen.