

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
December 8, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Luke 1:5-17
Luke 3:2-6**

Sermon: Raising a Saviour (Advent 2)

One summer when we travelled to Nova Scotia for vacation, we gathered at Paul's parents' home for a meal with his sister and her family. At the time our nieces were small – about three and five years old. They had just come from a vacation Bible School held in the community centre near their home. Apparently it had quite an impact on them, because at one point, the older of the two asked if we would all bow our heads and pray. "What are we praying for?" her grandfather asked. "I am praying for your salvation." she replied, "now will you bow your heads?"

At this point her little sister chimed in – "Don't forget to close your eyes – or you'll go to Hail!"

Later that evening their mother explained that the community vacation Bible school had been run by a "non-denominational" Christian group from the southern states. She started to realize the theological bent at bedtime one day that week, when one of the girls said to her: "Mummy do you know the count-down is already started?"

Her mother asked: "What count-down is that?" And the one replied, quite earnestly "I don't know, but I know it's getting closer every day."

The countdown's getting closer every day! That's the advent message we hear in Advent scripture and song, in poetry and in preaching. And it's not the 14 shopping days til Christmas countdown, either. It's the close your eyes and pray real hard kind – because Advent is about being prepared for that ultimate test.

Now I'm not a big believer in that "ultimate test" kind of Christian theology – the kind that says there is one ultimate judgement day – where we will all – dead or alive - be called up before the King of Heaven and separated into sheep and goats. I'm more of the "every day judgement day" kind of Christian, where each day we review and evaluate how we have lived up to God's vision – where we confess what we have done badly, but we also celebrate what we did well, and we give thanks for all the help we have received along the way.

However I do recognize that I owe much of that theology and faith to the family and the church community in which I was raised, and shaped as a follower of Jesus. My father was a member of the United Church, and my mother was a member of the Baptist Church. When I was really little they lived in Cornwall, the community where they had met and married. After their marriage, my father continued to attend the United Church, and my mother continued to attend the Baptist Church. I was too little to remember where the kids went (but knowing how well my dad dealt with diapers, I have my suspicions.)

When my parents moved to Montreal, they agreed they would **both** go to the church that was closest. And I thank God everyday that the very liberal United Church was just down the street and around the corner, while the very conservative Baptist church was farther away and required crossing a very busy street.

Since I turned out to be a fairly spiritual person, and church became my fulltime vocation, I can only imagine who I might have been had I been shaped by the more conservative church across town. I probably would have been either one of those countdown counting, salvation praying VBS leaders – or the proverbial rebel who turns her back on traditional Christianity.

In advent when we are reading scriptures getting ready for the birth of the Christ child, today I turn my thoughts towards the community that raised Jesus – the family connections, the teachings of the prophets, and the story of faith that shaped his understanding of God's kingdom.

The gospel's birth narratives are very clear. The birth of the Christ child was not something to be negotiated with kings and emperors. The angels of the annunciation were not sent to the wealthy or the proud. The word was not entrusted to those who claimed special religious expertise or the best place to worship. The measuring stick for the annunciation seems to have been for the angel to find good, ordinary faithful people. People who had known the sorrow of misfortune – people who worked hard to get by – people who had been displaced or who lived faithfully in spite of injustice or discrimination.

One of my favourite stories underlining the miracle of Christ's birth is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. In the long history of Israel's people, Elizabeth fits in the tradition of faithful women who had trouble bearing children, but who finally gave birth to a child because God decided there was a special role for that child to play.

Remember Sarah (of Abraham and Sarah) – Sarah was barren for decades – she was reportedly in her nineties when she bore Isaac, a son of Abraham. Then there was Rachel, wife of Jacob. When Rachel finally conceived and gave birth to Joseph, he grew into a visionary who saved Israel from famine. There is also the story of Hannah, who watched her husband's other wife bear child after child but could not conceive her own. Finally God heard Hannah's prayers and she became pregnant with Samuel, the great prophet who anointed King David and helped establish Israel as a spiritual nation.

Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, followed in all their footsteps.

In Elizabeth and Zechariah's story the angel came to Zechariah – just before worship was to begin, wouldn't you know?! But the congregation had to wait while the angel told Zechariah that Elizabeth would have a son, and his name would be John. John would grow up to be the one who would prepare the people for God's Messiah. When Zechariah questioned the angel's truth, the angel made him mute – he could not speak until the birth of his son.

Zechariah's first words after John's birth were the same words that we sang today at the beginning of the service: words of salvation and liberation, words of equity and peace.

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)

Elizabeth plays a counterpoint to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Where Elizabeth is old, Mary is young. Where Elizabeth is a wife of many years, but barren, Mary is fertile, but not yet married. Luke connected the two women through their family kinship as cousins. Then Luke connected their sons through God’s unfolding drama.

Mary and Joseph, as Jesus’ parents also shaped his ministry and his understanding of God’s kingdom. They were ordinary people, faithful in the little they had, and yet God blessed them with this extraordinary opportunity. After Mary heard the angel’s news, she sang a song of liberation much like Zechariah’s, best known as the Magnificat. Sometimes we forget how revolutionary her song was, how Mary not only praised God, but also predicted the overturning of the empire, and justice for the downtrodden in the birth of her son.

Elizabeth and Zechariah’s son John grew up to be John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus’ birth by recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah: John

went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’ (Luke 3:3-6)

From the crowds that John the Baptist attracted, we can tell that the people of God were already hungry for some kind of transformation, some sense of worth and relevance in God’s kingdom.

That hunger for right relationship with God must have shaped Jesus as well. As a Jewish boy he would have been taught to read and study the scriptures. He would have known the history of his people and the proclamations of the prophets, who envisioned swords turned into ploughshares, the hungry fed, and the poor raised up to eat with the powerful.

We know from one story in Luke that Jesus sat down and questioned the teachers at the temple in Jerusalem, that they welcomed his questions and that they were amazed at the new perspective he brought to the ancient stories. It paints a picture of Jesus’ community of faith as one that shaped his curiosity – rather than confining it. It reminds us that the story of God’s people is a story of liberation from oppression, new life born out of death, and a deeper connection to God than to wealth and power.

So often we have this Good Friday image of the Jewish establishment condemning Jesus. And yet there are many more references suggesting that his own people welcomed his questions and creativity, that he stood in the tradition of a faithful people who were already seeking freedom and dignity, because they believed that was what God intended for them, and for all children of God.

So how does Jesus' story, the story of the village that raised that Christ child, connect with us today? What does it mean when the prophets and John the Baptist call us to prepare? Perhaps what we need to prepare is a circle of support like Jesus had, to nourish people's love for God and advocacy for their neighbour.

Maybe it is an invitation:

- An invitation for us to embrace the unexpected like Zechariah and Elizabeth did;
- An invitation for us to repeat the faith of Mary and the courage of Joseph;
- An invitation for us to hear John the Baptist's call to repent and change what is not God's way;
- An invitation for us to build Christian community in a way that shapes all the young (and the not so young) people who pass through these doors – welcoming their questions, inspiring their creativity, and embracing the hope they share.

Maybe it is an invitation for us to follow Jesus all the way to Bethlehem and beyond.

Thanks be to God, Amen.