

INVESTING IN PEACE¹
Luke 1: 68-79
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Peace on earth is such a prominent part of the Christmas story that one wonders how the world can celebrate Christmas with a straight face. This is not placing blame on anyone or any nation; it is just an observation. The peace of Christmas is far more of a longing than a reality. Yet reality often begins with a longing.

I

This year the Christmas stories come in the wake of gunfire in Fort Hood, TX. We sing about peace on earth while we struggle to find peace in our neighborhoods. We read of peace on earth while we recognize the struggle hosts of people have trying to come to terms with relationships gone sour, budgets gone to pot, and families under stress. What a time to speak and sing of peace!

So while we long for peace, let us notice the birth of a little boy named John. If you tend to think that this ancient birth story has nothing to do with the struggles of today, then I ask you to stick with me. The story opens this

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way: *In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah...His wife was a descendent of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.*²

Now that may sound innocent enough, but Luke is about to tell us a story about how God was changing the face of history. And how would it be changed? Through the power politics of Herod of Judea? Would history be changed for the better because of this political leader who was part of what was then considered the most powerful nation on earth? Is God's ability to bring dramatic newness to the world limited to the precincts of any nation's political decisions? The answer to those questions seems to be obvious from Luke's perspective, and that is the perspective we are invited to consider this morning.

Luke tells a story about a world-changing event that begins among a group of people known in local parlance as the *Anawim*, the poor of the land, the nobodies, the peons, the invisible people of the world. They had little of the world's goods and even less power and privilege. They never had to stand before cameras, interview with the press, or argue before the courts. They were the forgotten; they blended into the landscape. The fact that Luke introduces two people, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, in the very same breath as King Herod, is a subtle message.

² Luke 1: 5.

Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a different world than Herod. Herod was a King, while Zechariah was a country priest, way down on the ecclesiastical hierarchy. His wife Elizabeth was dealing as best she could with the fact that they had not been able to conceive. *Both were getting on in years,* says the story.³ The implication is that both of them were settling down, learning to live with the inevitable, lowering the threshold of their youthful dreams, and hanging on till retirement. It was a plodding existence, hoping that they would live long enough to get some pleasure out of life, but not long enough to be a burden on anyone.

This sad old couple became the venue for God's great work in the world! History would remember Herod mainly as the King at the time when John the Baptist and Jesus were born. Yet Herod was not even aware of the events for which he would be remembered! God was quietly working in the lives of a forgotten older couple to bring about change. The church can easily fall into the trap of perpetuating the mistaken assumption that the greatest hope for good in the world is the person with all the power.

Luke's story of the birth of John the Baptist confirms the truth that James Russell Lowell would write centuries later, that

³ Luke 1: 7.

*...behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above his own.⁴*

II

Surely God was keeping watch over this aging man and wife who had just about given up hope. The story says that Zechariah was *chosen by lot...to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.*⁵ This was a big day in his life! All the priests of the land were divided into groups, and each group served twice a year for a week in the Temple. So when it was time for Zechariah's group to do its Temple service, Zechariah made his way to the city. Each year the priests in his group chose someone by lot to enter the Holy of Holies to bring incense to the altar, the most holy thing a priest could do.

Zechariah must have been shocked that his name was pulled from the hat! All his life he had been disappointed; never had he had the chance to enter that holy place. But now in his last years as priest, it was his name that was chosen! It was the unexpected pinnacle of his professional life! While the multitude of people were praying outside, Zechariah would enter the sanctuary alone and offer the incense. The people would be waiting expectantly outside for him to emerge from the Holy of Holies and offer them

⁴ James Russell Lowell, "Once to Every Man and Nation," stanza 3.

⁵ Luke 1: 9.

a blessing. But the people had a long wait. They waited and waited. Where was this country priest? Why was he delayed? The other priests must have fidgeted and whispered. Would any of them dare to go in and see what was wrong?

But in the way of biblical stories, we readers know what was happening. We know that in his religious fervor, Zechariah had seen a vision of an angel, and like everyone else in Luke's stories who encounter an angelic vision, Zechariah falls to his face in terror. And the angel says, *Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.*⁶

Zechariah had become so used to praying with no evident response from God, that when the angel tells him that he and Elizabeth will indeed have a son, he argues with the angel. *I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years*, he says.⁷ The argument goes something like this: Zechariah says emphatically, *I am old....* Then the angel says just as emphatically, *I am Gabriel*. Then they are nose to nose in argument. *I am old....I am Gabriel*. "You can't...you can! You won't....you will!" Finally, Zechariah comes out of the Holy of Holies mute, unable to speak, overcome by the divine.

⁶ Luke 1: 13.

⁷ Luke 1: 18.

Yet the angel proved to be right. Elizabeth did conceive, and a little boy was born. When they brought him for the traditional dedication, the community gathered around the parents celebrating the birth of their baby. Everyone thought they would name him Zechariah, Jr., after his father. But his mother said, *No, he is to be called John.* And poor, mute Zechariah confirmed it in writing on a notepad, *His name is John.* And the story tells us that immediately Zechariah's *mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.*

In language of praise and gratitude and hope for the future through the birth of a new generation, we have what has come to be called *The Benedictus*, surely an ancient hymn of the early church that drew from early Jewish piety but added a Christian dimension to the hymn:

*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 the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.⁸*

That haunting phrase, *...to guide our feet into the way of peace*, ends Zechariah's hymn, and yet it is the prayer of us all as we wait for Christmas this year.

⁸ Luke 1: 78-79.

III

It is our audacious faith that God's purposes in the world are not confined to the great and the powerful. There are ordinary people through whom God works, like the very people sitting here today! And there are dinner invitations more precious than an invitation to a state dinner.

Quiet, inconspicuous, humble lives can lead a church, a city, a nation, even a world into the way of peace. But first, we need nourishment for the journey. Welcome to the table. It's time for dinner!