

Luke 1:68-79

December 6, 2009

South Plains

Zechariah's Confession

I need to be honest with you. At this point in my life when I'm getting on in years, as they say, nothing else matters. I just want to confess... my sins, but more important, my faith. You see, I never wanted the notoriety of being known as Zechariah the father of John the Baptist. I was quite content to be an ordinary citizen of Israel, a simple religious person. That was enough.

It's true I am a priest, one of hundreds called upon to serve in the Jerusalem temple. My only claim to fame was that once, I was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. No false modesty here. It was a privilege I'll always remember, a once in a lifetime opportunity. I tried not to be distracted so that I would perform my duties decently and in order, and so that Elizabeth would be proud of me.

I love that woman. We've been married forever, and not a single complaint did I hear about our failure to produce a child. Naturally, it made us both sad, and a little frightened to think of having no one to care for us in our dotage. But she never complained. She came to the city with me on my assigned day in the temple.

It was when I entered the sanctuary alone that I saw the angel of the Lord who promised us a son who

would be great in the sight of the Lord. The promise came true, of course,... in a way, with the birth of Johnny. All Jerusalem came to know him as John the Baptist, the man who called down King Herod for adultery and got his head chopped off for telling the truth.

We knew him as that child we waited for so long, a baby to love and raise and watch as he grew up. Was wanting that so wrong? What we got was a person I could scarcely call my own son. Or, perhaps I should say a person I did not call, but someone called by the Lord. He was never religious in the way Elizabeth and I practiced our faith. Although he came from generations of a pious family, he almost seemed like a mutation, a different kind of religious.

I pray every day for the salvation of Israel, for rescue from our enemies. At first, I thought John wanted the same thing. I hoped he was just going about it in a different way. Not true. The enemy in his mind was the religious leadership of my colleagues, my fellow priests. And, the distrust was mutual. The priests would have gotten rid of him, except for his popularity. Too many people agreed with John's call for repentance. In the end, it was only Herod who had the guts to eliminate my son, and even Herod needed to be pushed by his wife. I confess that my initial pride in the birth of a son eventually turned into quiet embarrassment.

We all wanted a leader who would make the world better, more fair and just, more moral and spiritual. John

introduced a leader who wanted **us** to be fair and just, moral and spiritual. John pointed us to his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth. Then both of them got killed for speaking God's truth. Both of them died, willing to sacrifice themselves for the hope of that better world when everyone would do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

I admit I could not imagine that kind of sacrifice. Yes, I prayed and hoped for justice. But I only wanted to do my duty, to be a good citizen of our nation, to live faithfully among the people of God. But that was not enough. Not enough to change anything; and not enough for John and certainly not enough for God. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He wanted a radical change in behavior and he spelled it out:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise (Luke 3:11).

He confronted tax collectors and soldiers with their dishonesty and demanded more. "Prepare the way of the Lord," he said. I was afraid to ask what he expected of priests like me.

But, in the end, it was not better behavior that Johnny wanted. He wanted to see the Lord's coming. And, he wanted us to see it too. The business about making the crooked straight and the rough ways smooth -

- that was all working toward the day of the Lord "when all flesh shall see the salvation of God (3:6)."

Well, Herod put him in prison, and I went to see him in that dank and dreadful dungeon. I expected to find him depressed. After all those people were baptized in the Jordan, after all their professed repentance, nothing had changed. I was afraid the same thing was happening with Jesus of Nazareth. Great crowds of people flocked to hear his preaching. Some even became his disciples, including a few of John's followers. But, nothing had changed. Whatever Rome wanted, Rome got.

So, I expected to find my son down in the dumps, but that was not his nature. He had sent his followers to confront Jesus directly and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another (Luke 7:20)?" While I was there, they came back with a strange answer. Jesus told them that the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, and the poor have good news. Those words seemed to please John immensely. I confess that it meant nothing to me until much later when the disciples of Jesus showed me how those words fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah.

I should have known better. The fulfillment was right before my eyes from the very beginning. It was in the canticle I sang on the eighth day after John's birth. It was in the words my son proclaimed on the banks of Jordan. It was in the good news Jesus brought to the

poor. It's good news today for you and me as we gather around the Lord's Table.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercies 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.

The light has come. May it guide us to peace.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Surely it is right in Advent to thank you, merciful God, for the gifts of this season:

For friendships renewed and family ties celebrated; For smells and tastes to delight our senses; For music that swells our hearts; For opportunities to express the affection we feel for those we love; For the joy of giving; For all the beauty of your creation.

It is our privilege to praise your name for the salvation we know in Christ Jesus:

For grace that pointed us to the Savior; For stirrings of faith; For the relief of repentance and forgiveness; For satisfaction in service and the hope of hearing, 'Well done, good and faithful one;' And for the promised resurrection of life with you.

Your Holy Spirit fills us with courage to ask and pray for all the blessings of abundant life:

For healing on behalf of Nel, Christine, Ed and all in need; For strength as we face the loneliness of losing those we love, the uncertainties of jobs and income, the bitterness of unsettling memories around the holiday season, the threat of death. We pray for joy and peace in a world upset by disaster and hatreds.

Come to us now in the power of your Spirit to set aside this bread and cup from ordinary use so that by faith we might partake of your promised salvation. Let the life,

death and resurrection of Jesus Christ work new life in us, for we pray as he taught us, Our Father....