

John the Baptist: Follow Christ through the Land of Unlikeness

Luke 1:5-25; 57-66

Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND

December 4, 2011

Rev. Dr. Anne Dilenschneider

During the years 1941-1942, the great poet W. H. Auden wrote a 52 page poem titled
For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio.

This Advent, over the next 3 weeks, I will be setting the stories of John the Baptist, Joseph, and Mary in the context of the chorus of that poem. In the Chorus, Auden writes:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

This week, hear again:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

John the Baptist comes first.

We usually hear the stories of John in the wilderness
Dressed in skins and eating honey and wild locusts
And telling everyone:
He is the Way
And urging others
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness
And we know what happens when you do,
Because, like John, we know
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

We do not usually hear the story of how John came to be this way

We do not hear about his context –
the story of his parents and his birth
If we did,

we would see how John fits within a larger context that reminds us:
Nothing is impossible for and with God.

Do not limit your imagination!

Let's take a look at the story of John, from the beginning.

His parents are Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Luke tells us:

Both of them were righteous before God.

That doesn't mean they were perfect

And living narrow, rigid lives.

It actually means quite the opposite!

As Luke tells us:

They lived *blamelessly*

Now that is one of the most unfortunate translations in the Bible,
because when we read "blamelessly" with out 21st century eyes
we think it means "never making any mistakes."

That's the OPPOSITE of what the Hebrew word means.

The Hebrew word, *tamim*,

means to be "whole-hearted"

It means:

To trust and love God enough

that you trust God with ALL your feelings

and thoughts and actions:

good, bad, indifferent

with your joys, sorrows AND angers

because your relationship with God

is that close and that strong

that nothing is hidden

and you trust God's love for you

exactly as you are right now,

NOT as you might be someday

when you are all cleaned up

and you have everything

"together."

In Hebrew Scriptures,

The first person who is *tamim* is Noah

he trusts God with everything

and this is why he and his family are saved.

Being *tamim* -- being "whole-hearted"

and not hiding before God --

is SO important

that the word is written differently

and you can find it immediately

whenever a Torah scroll is unrolled.

David,

Who writes psalms about his joys and his sorrows and his angers

(Who writes about shooting his enemies and boiling them in oil!)

is *tamim*
So is Hannah,
a barren woman who wants to have a child
and prays so whole-heartedly to God in the Temple
that they think she is drunk
and try to haul her off.
Of course, you know her child will be Samuel!
Scripture is full of people who are *tamim*,
“whole-hearted,”
including Zechariah and Elizabeth

And Luke tells us they have been “whole-hearted” with God about their deepest desire:
they have no children,
and Elizabeth is barren,
and both of them are getting on in years.

That’s another clue.
Nothing is impossible.

Do not limit your imagination!

Many, many times in scripture,
Women are barren,

and many are far too old to have children . . .
and they do have children.

Sarah, who is 90 (Gn. 16-21)

Rebecca, who doesn’t have Jacob & Esau

until she and Isaac have been married 20 years (Gn. 25)

Rachel, whose sister has 7 children, and she has none (Gn. 30)

Samson’s mother (Judges 13)

Hannah, who is mocked because she has no children,

and prays and gives birth to Samuel (1 Sam. 1)

The Shunammite woman, who provided a home for the prophet Elisha
(2 Kings 4)

and now Elizabeth

Although these stories are about physical birth,
they remind us that

even though our lives may seem barren and empty
at ANY time, even in our old age

we may be the ones who bring something new into the world.

God’s never finished with any of us!

Nothing is impossible.

Do not limit your imagination!

As Auden writes:

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

The key is being “whole-hearted” with God!

Luke tells us more:

Zechariah is at the Temple, and the angel Gabriel appears.

Now everyone in the Bible has the same response to angels:
they are “terrified.”

And every time the angel says:

“Do not be afraid.”

It’s one of those choruses that go through the Bible.

And, of course, they – and we – are afraid.

And we should be!

Because in those moments

on some level we know:

Our world is going to be turned upside down.

Life as we knew it is never going to be the same.

There is no turning back.

Whenever you hear “Do not be afraid!”

you know there’s an adventure coming!

As Auden writes:

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

Gabriel tells Zechariah:

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 wants assurances about this good news, as we all do, and asks:

How will I know that this is so?

For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.

But, of course, age is never, ever, an excuse

to avoid God’s call . . .

And nothing is impossible,

ever.

Zechariah is silenced until John is born

because he could not believe this.

And when John was born,

and Zechariah committed himself to God

by naming his child, John, as the angel told him,
and was able to speak again,
everyone wondered:
“What then will this child become?”

This is the context of John the Baptist,
the one who stands out in the wilderness
that place where we always meet God
and calls us.

Each year during Advent,
John calls us
from the places we hide from God
in our limited imaginations.

I imagine him speaking
and hearing him the way Terry Jacobson
a farmer and poet up in Wales, North Dakota writes:

you gently chide me,
almost like planting seeds,
to dare to follow
dreams
of less trod trails,
as if to tell me
it is time to
fish or cut bait.
If I were to
answer that
I can't even
afford a pole
I suppose you'd
ask if I had
a hook and line.

John the Baptist tells us we're never off the hook!

Each year during Advent,
John calls us
to imagine,
to be whole-hearted,
and step forward just as we are.

He says:
*He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.*

Sources:

Academy of American Poets: W. H. Auden <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/120>
<http://www.cs.utsa.edu/~wagner/church/auden/index.html>
“TNT” in *Big Thoughts from a Small Farmer* by Terry Jacobson
Peninsula Temple Beth-El Torah Study

Texts:

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

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, ‘No; he is to be called John.’ They said to her, ‘None of your relatives has this name.’ Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors,

and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.