

Yr. C, Advent 2
December 9, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1482 words

Lessons: Baruch 5:1-9
Canticle 16 (Luke 1:68-79)
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of...Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the person who was *most inspired* by God to change the world turned out to be the most *improbable person*—John, the wilderness man...John, the locust and honey-eater, dressed in camel hair.

Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas—they all knew what their job was because they were born into it. So how did ‘improbable John’ know what *he* was supposed to do? How do people like us know what *we* are supposed to do?

Jon Meacham, presidential historian (and Sewanee graduate) gave a powerful eulogy this week. He shared how President George H.W. Bush was the only one of three navy men to survive after their plane was shot down. He reckoned *then*, and thereafter, with the question, “Why me?” and the corollary question, “What am I supposed to do with this life?”

All our lives are shaped by various crises—large and small. If we are paying attention, these moments present us with the *same* challenging questions: Why me? What am I supposed to do with this life? The answers—they come from somewhere else, somewhere deep. We’ll get to that in a moment. But first, I want to tell you about an old man.

The old man was nearly finished—not only with his shift at work, but with his life. His faith had been put to the test for so long. He had every reason to ask the questions we all ask: Why me? What I am supposed to do with this life? The old man said his prayers every day, and at least one of those deep, personal prayers remained unanswered...until the messenger spoke...right beside the altar...with God and all the people looking on in broad daylight!

The old man was caught off guard—startled, afraid—as Gabriel said these words: “Fear no longer, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife is going to give birth to a son.”

When is the last time *you* were caught off guard by the grace of God? When were you minding *your own business* until some messenger—some angel—spoke a word that changed everything?

Gabriel picked the most awkward time and place to break the news to Zechariah. This priest—on duty at the altar—simply couldn’t believe it. His own *name* means “God remembered,” but he couldn’t believe it. Zechariah knew that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were too old for this. So, he shrugged and asked the *obvious* question, “But how?”

And those were the last words he spoke. With an entire congregation out there and priestly work left to do, Zechariah lost his ability to speak because he was asking too little!

Chances are, we’re *also* asking too little—of God and of ourselves. The God of miracles and messengers delights in our big, hopeful questions, like...“What am I supposed to do with this life?”

The old man had nine months of silence to think about how his life was *not* yet over...and then he became a father. Zechariah's tongue was set free and he broke forth with poetry like a song. First, he blessed God, and then he blessed his child.

Three years ago a funny article appeared in *The Atlantic* entitled, 'Hit Charade.' The subtitle was irresistible: "Meet the bald Norwegians and other unknowns who actually create the songs that top the charts."¹

I learned that a Swedish man in his late 40's—Karl Martin Sandberg—is the biggest pop star in America. He's responsible for more hits than Michael Jackson or the Beatles. Then, there are the bald Norwegians—Mikkel Eriksen, Tor Hermansen, and Lukasz Gottwald. For more than a decade these middle-aged Scandinavian men have been writing *America's* pop hits.

This is not necessarily bad, but it is surprising! These songs shape the way we think...about love and break-up's...about money and success...about happiness and pain. The lyrics we enjoy singing are shaping the assumptions we make and the questions we ask about life.

Are we assuming too much? Are we asking too little? Do our favorite songs inspire us to blame or to bless other people? Do our favorite songs challenge us to live more superficially or more deeply? What *are we* supposed to do with this life?

If you read the opening chapters of the Gospel according to St. Luke, you will discover that it is filled with songs of blessing—the Song of Zechariah, the Song of Mary, the Song of the Angels to the shepherds, the Song of Simeon. The beginning of Luke reads more like a songbook than a Gospel—and these songs shape our thinking, our questions, our prayers, and our own inclination to bless God as well as other people.

Well, there you have it! The crises of our lives present the questions, like: Why me? What am I supposed to do with this life? But it is the songs of our lives that hold the *answers*.

The reason John the Baptist knew what he was supposed to do with his life is because he heard it in a song: 'Improbable John' was inspired by God *through* the song of his father. 'Improbable John' was inspired by God *through* the blessing of his father.

How many times did John hear that blessed Song of Zechariah? "You, my child, shall be called prophet of the Most High. You, my child, will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You, my child, will give people knowledge of salvation. You, my child, shall point to the new dawn from on high. You, my child, will show us the light which shines in darkness. You, my child, shall reveal the One who will lead us in the pathway of peace."

This song was powerful for John. It answered his question: "What am I supposed to do with this life?" I believe it was similar for George H.W. Bush. I believe it was the songs he learned and sang at Christ Episcopal Church, Greenwich, CT, which answered the question presented by his crisis: "What am I supposed to do with this life?"

Songs have immense power to shape our lives. Songs can challenge our assumptions, when we assume too much. Songs can inspire hopeful questions, when we ask too little. Songs help us pray more boldly and bless more freely than we ever dreamed!

Take home the Song of Zechariah and pray it this week. Think about how *you* bless God; and...think about how

¹ Nathaniel Rich's "Hit Charade: Meet the bald Norwegians and other unknowns who actually create the songs that top the charts" in *The Atlantic*, October, 2015.

you bless your children...or grandchildren...or godchildren...or *this community's* children...or any children who are poor, hungry, vulnerable or neglected.

As you pray the Song of Zechariah this week your homework is to write at least one song of blessing for a child in *your life*. It might be a literal child...or grandchild...or godchild...or it might be an adult child. It might just be a child of God with whom you have no family tie.

Just take a fraction of the time you'll spend shopping for gifts and *compose a gift* that will be timeless. Zechariah had nine months to compose his song, so yours may not be as poetic. The Scandinavians have had a lot more practice, so your song will probably not make the charts. This is not a competition. Simply write a song of blessing that is true and good and beautiful.

In the first half of your song, write, "Blessed be the Lord..." and fill in the blank with your own words about your heartfelt gratitude for God's grace.

In the second half of your song, write these words: "You, my child, shall be..." and then fill in the blank with your own words of hope, encouragement, gratitude, praise, and challenge.

As you pray Zechariah's song and then pray over *your* song(s) of blessing, don't be afraid to be bold as you bless God and the people you love. Be lavish as you praise God and the people you love. Be challenging as you expect more of God and the people you love.

The children of God who are fortunate enough to receive your songs of blessing this Christmas may just feel what John the Baptist felt. They may be inspired to change the world because *you* believe in *them*. They may end up preparing the way for the Lord because *you* blessed *them*. They may end up pointing to the Light of God, breaking like a new day, because *you* challenged and inspired *them*.

We all experience crises in our lives which present us with questions, like: "Why me?" and "What am I supposed to do with this life?" This Christmas, give the gift that helps supply a timeless answer—a song of blessing.

Amen.