

Illuminated by a Promise: When the Light Flickers

Luke 1:67-79

There was a young woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. This young woman read everything she could put her hands on—philosophy, history, psychology, religion, self-improvement books. She got a lot smarter, but nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life. They had long and lively discussions, but no two of them agreed on the same thing. So still, she had no answer. Finally she put all her belongings in storage, and she set off to find out if people in other parts of the world knew more about the meaning of life than people here.

She went to South America; she went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they weren't sure about the meaning of life either. But they had heard of a woman who did...only they weren't sure where she lived. The young woman kept traveling and asking, until finally someone told her how to reach the wise woman's home.

She walked miles and miles, and climbed to a little house at the top of a mountain. She knocked at the door. "Yes," said the kind looking old woman who opened it. "I have been halfway around the world to ask you one question," the young woman said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Come in and have some tea," the old woman said.

"No—I mean no, thank you," the breathless young woman said. "I didn't come for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you please just tell me, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old woman said. So the seeker gave in and went inside. While the old woman was brewing the tea, she caught her breath. And then she began telling the old woman about all the things she had done to try to discover meaning and truth: the books she had read, the people she had met, all the places she had been; how long she had been looking for the answers to life, how nothing had satisfied her; that still, no answer appeared. Nothing had worked; no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find the thing that satisfied her need to know.

The old woman just listened--which was just as well, because the young woman kept talking. As she talked, the old woman put a teacup in her hand and began to pour the tea. She kept listening, and she also kept pouring--until the tea flowed over the sides of the cup and started to spill onto the floor.

"What are you doing?" the younger woman shouted when the tea burned her hand. "It's full! Can't you see that? Stop! There's no room!"

"Yes," the old woman said to her. "You came here wanting something from me, but there's no room in your cup. Come back when your cup is empty, and then we'll talk."

Sometimes, just like this young woman, we try to find what we are looking for by over-filling our lives—with good things: advice, analysis, exciting projects and experiences. But is that where we will find what we need? Is it possible that we're working harder at this than we need to? Imagine yourself in an apartment in a tall, windowed building in downtown Manhattan—or even San Jose. It's night-time, dark outside. We keep turning on lights inside our apartment, our lives, to make it look like day. Outside of our interior space, there are other lights in the city, and stars in the sky. But the brighter we make it on the inside, the less we can see through the windows, into the darkness. We can, in fact, make that apartment into a prison, something we can't see out of, simply by turning on every light we can find, trying to brighten everything up. It's not until we let some of the lights in the apartment go out, that we can see that in fact there are friendly lights, signs of life, even in the midst of the darkness out there. We can't see them unless we are willing to live with some darkness in our own lives too.

The text we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke is the story of a man who was afraid of the dark, a man who talked too much. Luke doesn't actually say that about Zechariah, but I think that's just because he was too polite.

Zechariah was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. He was one of probably hundreds of priests whose job it was to go to the Temple every day and process animal sacrifices that people brought either to appease the God who might be angry at them, or to feed the God who might be inclined to answer their prayers. We picture priests in holy places praying and meditating, but in Zechariah's day, their job had a lot to do with blood and guts, as they presided over those sacrifices. Every day one priest was chosen, by lottery, to go into the Holy of Holies—the center part of the Temple where God was said to visit regularly—but all the rest of their duties were pretty routine.

Zechariah had been doing this job for a long time; he was old. He was bored. And his life at home wasn't all that great either. He'd been married for a long time to a good woman, Elizabeth, but no matter how hard they tried, they'd never been able to have children; and this was a sorrow...to him, but even more to her. He went to work every day, while she stayed at home and lived daily with her shame. When Zechariah got home at night, her disappointment hung like a cloud in their house.

And so, Zechariah talked. Sometimes he told Elizabeth about funny things that happened at work, but mostly he talked about history and philosophy. It's what his training as a priest had steeped him in. And the way he looked at it, history suggested that nothing new—or good—was likely to happen in the future, either. He talked about all the terrible things the Hebrew people had lived through. For hundreds of years, wave after wave of armies had marched through their land—the land that God had promised to *them*! Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, then the Greeks, now the Romans—what was wrong with the world? He asked questions he knew had no answers: Why doesn't God do something about this? Why don't the Democrat and Republican high priests get over their fights with one another and start acting like leaders?! Where is that Messiah, anyway? Just a pipe dream, Zechariah thought (and said out loud, over and over again); it's never going to happen. His disappointment in his country's history matched Elizabeth's disappointment with her life.

One day Zechariah's turn came—his lottery number got called—to keep the incense burning in the holiest part of the Temple. He was in that dark, still space, lit by just a single candle. He looked up from the altar, and suddenly there was something hovering above the table. Zechariah wasn't given to visions, but there it was, an angel, right in front of him. "Your prayers have been answered, Zechariah," the angel said; "You and Elizabeth will have a child. Not just any child; your child will be special. He will bring great joy—not just to you, but to many; because he will do important work. He will prepare the people to welcome the coming of the Messiah."

Instead of just listening to this announcement and pondering it silently for a few minutes, Zechariah started to talk. He couldn't help himself. "I can't imagine that," he started. "I'm old, and my wife is pretty old too." And then he started in on the list of other things that made him skeptical that this angel knew what he was talking about. Messiah? Did you know that we've been waiting for a Messiah for centuries, and it hasn't happened? The Romans are right outside; they'll never let it happen. We thought God was going to save us before, when the Babylonians were coming, but no—they just kept coming. Do you have any idea how strong these armies are?

"Stop!" the angel said. Stop. Stop talking, so that you can listen; stop cementing things into place with your words. Something new is happening here; something you have hoped for is about to be born. Don't wreck it. Just wait...quietly.

And so Zechariah stopped talking. For nine months, he did not speak. Can you imagine spending nine months in silence, or in darkness; not being able to control your environment with own words or with what you see? It's hard for me to imagine for myself, but I can guess at what happened for Zechariah.

When Elizabeth complained of morning sickness, he couldn't give her advice; he just held her. When the baby began to kick, he put his hand on her stomach and they shared their joy—in silence.

In those months of silence, something began to change in Zechariah. Without the armor of all those old, familiar words, he heard and saw things differently. He began to look at those folks who came into the temple with their little bird sacrifices not as an annoyance, but as people who needed something, people who trusted that God could make happen what they hoped for. Could it be that even those routine, daily rituals were practices that kept them faithful; that what mattered was that they just kept showing up while they waited and watched for their hope to arrive?

When he stopped talking about those damn Romans whose occupation of Israel interfered with the freedom the promised land was supposed to bring, he started to notice people's small acts of kindness toward one another, the ways they helped and encouraged each other, how much their life together could *feel* like the promised land even if they weren't fully free.

Even Elizabeth looked different to him: more capable than he would have thought. Who knew she could manage a difficult, late-in-life pregnancy even without his advice?

Finally their child was born. Instead of following the custom of giving him his father's name, Zechariah and Elizabeth named him John. The silence had confirmed what the angel had told him: this child would be unusual, the answer to a long hope and a persistent prayer. Finally, Zechariah spoke again—not in the cynical way he used to talk, but as if there was a new story he had to tell. When he spoke to his son for the first time, he used the very same words the angel had said to him in that dark, holy little room:

*You, my child, will be called the prophet of God;
for you will go before the Messiah to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

Darkness, silence, changed Zechariah. And it can change us too. That's the power of Advent: to remind us that *we* do not have to manufacture all the light; we do not have to speak all the right words. If we are willing simply to wait, maybe we will see—and hear--what we need most to know: God acts, just as God has acted before. God can still do something miraculous—even here, even now. And then maybe we too can speak a new story. May our story be the same story Zechariah told:

*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.*