Be Amazed…Peace is Possible

Luke 1:5-25

Allow me to have a little personal reminiscence this morning. My father and my eldest son, Michael, were both US Army reservists. As reservists they served one weekend a month at their assigned base and two weeks every year in various locations. My father was in ROTC, Reserve Officer Training Corps, in college and upon graduation spent two years in Germany to fulfill his obligation to the Army. Once stateside, his two weeks of duty were spent in the US, mostly at East Coast bases. Michael served his first two weeks of annual duty six miles from the DMZ in South Korea. I lost a few hours of sleep over that placement. After that his two-week stints were stateside and his monthly duty was served in Reading, PA. Why am I sharing this information with you? To help you envision what Zechariah was doing in Jerusalem when he encountered God's announcing angel.

At the time of the Exodus, God established the priestly order starting with Aaron and his sons. Going forward in time, if your father was a priest, as your father's son you were a priest, also. Over the centuries, as you might imagine, the number of priests grew exponentially. By the time of King David, there were so many priests that he divided them into divisions, of which there were twelve. These divisions served in rotation

in the Temple for two weeks at a time. In today's story, Zechariah's division was serving its two weeks of duty.

Again, because there were so many priests, even during your designated duty you might not have a set assignment. Daily tasks were assigned by the lot. On this particular day the lot fell to Zechariah to burn incense before the Lord. This was a high honor since only the designated priest could enter the court where the incense was offered, everyone else waited outside for his return and report from the Lord.

At this time in history, the Scripture reminds us that Israel was under Roman rule and Herod was the puppet king of the territory. The PAX Romana, or peace of Rome, was the rule of the day. However Roman peace came at a very high price, both in taxes to Rome and capital punishment, as the practice of crucifixion attested. We might imagine that during his time before the altar of incense, Zechariah was praying for freedom from Rome, peace in his nation, and the return of the Davidic Kingdom. Perhaps while at the altar of incense he also asked why he and his wife, both devout people, had been denied the joy of having a child.

In ancient Israel, to be childless was to endure ridicule, even scorn. A barren woman was seen as someone bearing a curse for some personal sin. Perhaps Elizabeth, in moments of despair, may have even blamed Zechariah, much as Rachel had pleaded with Jacob "Give me children,

or I'll die!" (Genesis 30:1) Peace may have been elusive in the household of Zechariah and Elizabeth at times through the years. This encounter with the angel would change things, forever; not just for Zechariah and Elizabeth, but the world.

Back to the temple where Zechariah is delayed in exiting the court where he had been burning incense. There was likely some shifting of feet, furtive glances between those gathered outside, questions about if someone could check on Zechariah with dying in the process. The peace of mind of those gathered was getting a bit shaky, concerned that something bad may have befallen Zechariah. Then, when he did finally appear, he was unable to speak. Zephaniah's gesturing to explain what had happened convinced the gathered crowd that something extraordinary had occurred, although he could not tell them what it was.

Next, we read that "when his time of service was completed, he returned home." We are not told when Zechariah burned incense in the Temple. Was it his first day? His first week? How many days did he agonize about not being able to tell Elizabeth about what he had seen, another whole week? Had anyone gone to Elizabeth to tell her that her husband had been struck dumb? The days between his encounter with the angel and being reunited with his wife might have been an unsettled time for Zechariah.

After he does return home, we read that the prediction made by the angel in the Temple did come to fruition. Elizabeth, even in her old age, would bear a child and she gave praise to God saying:

> "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Peace would settle over her and Zechariah as their long-awaited child would be born. But he would not be just any child. This child would be the forerunner to the Prince of Peace. The harbinger telling the world that God's kingdom was coming and to prepare the way for Messiah.

Many years have passed since John the Baptist called out in the wilderness "prepare the way of the Lord" and had the honor of baptizing his cousin, Jesus, and the world is still awaiting lasting peace. During Advent we wait again for the birth of the Christ child. We look forward to the peace we expect him to bring. But what will that peace look like?

Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 11:6-

> "The wolf will live with the **lamb**, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the **lion** and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them."

We read in Genesis that God created all things and pronounced them good. Then sin entered the world and the peace that was in the Garden, where lions and lambs could coexist was shattered. Jesus himself tells us there will be strife in life. Where is the peace we are looking for?

As I wrote those words the lyrics to an old song came to my mind:

> Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

What if the peace Christ promises starts with us. Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote in *Gift from the Sea*:

> I want first of all – in fact, as an end to these other desires – to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out these obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact – to borrow from the language of the saints – to live "in grace" as much of the time as possible. I'm not using this term in a strictly theological sense. By grace I mean inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony. I'm seeking perhaps what Socrates asked for in the prayer from the Phaedrus when he said, "May the outward and inward man be as one." I would like to achieve a state of inner spiritual grace from which I could function and give as I was meant to in the eye of God.

Anne, the wife of decorated aviator Charles Lindbergh, and mother of his kidnapped and murdered infant son, certainly had reason to seek peace. Sadly, our world is no closer to world peace than in Anne's day.

The Apostle Paul, in his letters to the Romans, tells us where we will find the promised peace we are searching for:

> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and **peace** as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the **Holy Spirit**. Romans 15:13

It is in our hope in Jesus and trust in his word that peace is possible. If each of us can live at peace within ourselves, which I will admit is a challenge in a world of selfie-obsessed Tik Tok influencers, we can start the ripple effect of peace that can spread to the world. May that day come soon.

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