

In the Days of King Herod

Luke 1:5-25 by Patty Friesen (Second Advent, Dec. 8/24)

On this second Sunday of Advent, Luke seems to have full record of Jesus' miraculous birth beginning with his cousin John's own miraculous birth. Luke is not a direct disciple, not one of the 12 like Matthew, Mark and John. He is probably a Gentile from Ephesus since he seems to know a lot about that city when he writes the book of Acts. Luke knows how to create strong biblical characters, painting vivid scenes with his words, giving structure to the entirety of his work. For example, Luke enjoys pairing women and men, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon.

Luke begins in the traditional storytelling method, "In the days of King Herod." It is like "Once upon a time" but this time is specific to first century Palestine and the characters are specific beginning with King Herod whose violence overshadows the whole Christmas story. Luke assumes we know King Herod but for we modern readers, King Herod was a composite of religious, cultural and political clashes in the Middle East. He was Arab in ethnicity, Jewish in religion, Greek in culture and Roman in politics. He was established on his throne by Caesar Octavian to secure Roman control over Palestine. He had ten wives, killed one of them and two male heirs he was jealous of. At his death he had ordered all the Jewish leaders to be killed in the stadium at Jericho so there would be some kind of public mourning since he knew no one would mourn his death.

So when we hear "in the days of King Herod," we know these are days of violence and oppression and that Herod is perfectly capable of having all the

male infants of Bethlehem killed in jealousy of the new king, just as Pharaoh had all the Hebrew babies killed in Exodus chapter 1. We know that in the days of King Herod, or in the days of Pharaoh, or in the days of Joseph Stalin or in the days of Vladimir Putin, in the days of Donald Trump, in the days of Benjamin Netanyahu, there is nothing new under the sun with despotic kings.

In contrast to the violent days of King Herod comes gentle vulnerable elderly Elisabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah means “God remembered” and he is a priest whose wife Elisabeth’s name means, “God’s oath” is also from a priestly family. They are righteous and blameless, obedient to God and yet not blessed with a child. The condition of childlessness and the context of the Zechariah serving in the temple, immediately reminds us of Hannah praying for a child in the temple in 1 Samuel. It gives us hope, as God worked for Hannah giving her a son Samuel, God may work for Elisabeth giving her a son.

Zechariah was serving in the temple offering sacrifices where this story takes place. As there were 24 groups of Jewish priests serving for a week in the Temple twice a year, they drew lots to serve the inner sanctuary so one might be chosen to serve once in a lifetime in the Holy of Holies. In the middle of his work of making sacrifices to God, an angel appears to Zechariah with the first recorded speech in the gospel, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid will become the theme of the entire gospel as God continually bursts into people’s lives. Then Gabriel gives a two-part announcement – first, Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son whose name is to be John meaning God is gracious. And secondly, there

will be another birth of the Messiah and joy and gladness will accompany both births.

Zechariah replies emphatically like Mary the mother of Jesus in Luke chapter 2, "How can this be?" Gabriel replies equally emphatically, "This can be because I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time anyhow, 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 emerged, he was supposed to pronounce a blessing over the people, the once in a lifetime, highpoint of his career and he cannot speak. While the crowd knows he has seen a vision and has been rendered speechless. This is a drama that affects everyone. Israel waiting for God's blessing outside the temple, parallels this ancient couple's waiting for a child and this is a call for all of us despairing about these days, to believe that it is never too late for those who wait upon the Lord.

These wonderful Advent stories are the windows to this season that help us see into the mystery of incarnation, God with us. These stories are not so much biographical information on the origin and birth of Jesus as rich perspectives on the mystery of God and human life. They are narrative accounts compiled by the early Christian community, which speak to the *meaning* of the Christ event. They preserve for us their own windows upon these truths. Then each

generation has taken these windows and have painted, sculpted, sung and written about them to gain more appreciation and understanding of them as the centuries go by.

In Luke, barrenness and hopelessness is found in the body of a woman, the elderly Elizabeth. It recalls Hannah, but also Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel and other biblical women. We often think of Mary during this season, the fresh bud ripening with her pregnancy of Christ but her fruitfulness was in season. She was a symbol of fertility, ready to receive God. But it is Elizabeth, old Elizabeth's conceiving is even more remarkable. She was unable to even support new life even if she could conceive it. In her historical moment, barrenness defined her social identity as hopeless. She more than any other of these Advent characters is a true symbol of waiting.

We begin Advent today with the aged Elizabeth and Zechariah in the temple with Gabriel and the story ends with the aged Anna and Simeon in the temple at Jesus' child dedication in Luke 2. Elderly women and men are the bookends to the Jesus story in Luke. When Mary and Joseph come to consecrate the infant Jesus, in the temple in Jerusalem, they bring the sacrifice of the poor - two turtledoves. It is there they meet Anna the prophet who had been living in the temple and Simeon who tells Mary that her son will cause the rise and fall of many in Israel and that a sword will pierce her own soul.

In the midst of the Christmas story, we have hints of the violence that overshadow the life and death of this child. He avoids death when he is young as his parents escape to Egypt as King Herod murders the innocents in Bethlehem

looking for him. From the moment of his birth, Jesus is dodging death. Mary watches all this, bearing witness to it.

Indeed at the cross, Mary stays a faithful watchful presence in the midst of evil while everyone else around her flows in compromise - the fearful runaway disciples, the traitorous Pilate, the fickle crowds. In her suffering, she mirrors Christ's suffering and becomes a model for a strong standing presence in the face of evil. She defines non-violent discipleship in standing and bearing witness. In the days of King Herod – it is the elderly and the infants, the poor, the refugees who are God's chosen people. There will always be days of King Herod's throughout human history, and throughout human history, there are always witnesses to God's new work of vulnerability and peace and always a new beginning or new birth pushing back.

Let us pray...Thank you Faithful God that your gentle unpredictable way finds new beginnings in the midst of violent struggles for power and land. Help us trust in your gentle ways when it seems like peace is hopeless. Jesus himself was subject to this kind of violence and yet continued to proclaim your way of peace. Help us find that path as well. Amen.