

Holiness Draws Near...in spite of us*

Luke 1:68-79*

Advent II

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May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good Morning!

He's a priest. Always has been. He's been a priest for what seems like forever. His father was a priest, so was his grandfather, his great grandfather and so on. He's married to the daughter of a priest, whose ancestors were among the very first priests. Being a priest is the family's identity. Being a priest is what he is and it is what he does.

On some days, it's all a bit much to live up to. Even though the vocation is hereditary, tradition has it (then) that the highest degree of holiness among human beings was that of the priests. As such, only they could rightly enter the places whose degree of spatial holiness was the highest. (thus the Oxford Companion to the Bible p 609 tells us.) So what that means is that he and his fellow priests are the ones who serve at the Temple. They are the ones who sacrifice the animals, offer the prayers and burn the incense. They are the only ones allowed near the altars in the courtyards or in the inner rooms in the sanctuary.

There are 24 groups, and they split their duties up over the year. He's on for a week every six months, doing the things priests do. It's his group's turn to serve at the temple.

And as providence would have it, on this day, he is selected to be the one to venture in, not quite to the Holy of Holies, but close enough. He is selected to be the one to light and burn the incense for the prayers. Pretty much a once in a lifetime priestly opportunity.

Zechariah is inside, lighting the incense when an Angel appears. Let's be clear even though he is serving the Holy, making a sacrifice to the holy, I'm pretty sure he wasn't actually expecting to see the holy. He was doing his thing. Getting the job done—probably praying a bit—maybe just maybe his mind was wandering a bit as well. Maybe since this was his only shot at doing the incense maybe he was admiring himself a bit as he worked, "Doing alright Zech—doing alright."

When suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to the right of the Altar of the Lord. Like I said, just because you are doing the Holy, serving the Holy—doesn't always mean you are actually expecting to encounter the Holy.

Then there's the angel. The angel saying the things, as we know, that angels—messengers of God say, "Don't be afraid. Your wife—Elizabeth--your wife will give birth to a son. You must name this son, John. And this son, your son, will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He'll turn hearts of fathers back to their children, he'll make the disobedient righteous, mostly he'll make the people prepared for the coming of the Lord."

To which the priest says in disbelief, the guy whose business it is to pray for the coming of the savior, the guy whose calling in life is to be faithful says, "How can this be? My wife and I are very old?"

The angel Gabriel is not feeling the love. Even though at his next stop—when he goes to visit the virgin in Nazareth and asks her about having God's son. Even though Mary is equally confused, she's not a religious professional so Gabriel is a bit more easygoing with her. But Zechariah—he should have known the holy when he saw it. He should have known the Holy when it glowed next to him.

So Gabriel says to Zechariah, because you did not believe you will now not talk until this little one comes to be.

As you can tell, I have some empathy for our priestly friend. It's easy to miss holiness. Easy, so very easy to get caught up in what we are doing, what we have to do, and what we may never get done even though everyone wants us to—it's so easy to get caught up in our lives that we miss holiness in our midst. We're not expecting it, so we don't see it.

Or we do see it—its just that we cannot get our heads around to believing it. Its not rational, logical, or *commonsenseical*. Our brains say huh, our mouths say, "I dunn'o...."

Regardless of our subjective response, sometimes holiness appears and the hairs on the back of our necks raise, our eyes tear, our hearts sigh and a song of sorts begins to well up deep inside.

This is what I think happened with our friend Zecheriah. He saw the holiness, questioned its existence and he had to wait nine months before he could say, "This is my son, the one who will prepare the way for our savior."

My friends in this time of Advent, holiness will appear. Will you, will I, will any one of us be attentive enough to see it, to know it. In this time when it is daily getting darker earlier, I invite us all to await, to expect an angel of God, a messenger of the Lord to appear. Trust your hearts and trust your tears the holy will draw near. Amen.