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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT

December 9, 2018

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year C

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This week, former President George H.W. Bush was laid to rest. There were many kind and admiring words said about him by many people. The most touching were said by his son, former President George W. Bush. Like most presidents, at the time he held office the 41st president was liked by some and not by others.

At the time of a person's death we honor them by remembering the good things about them, the admirable parts of their character, and sometimes the funny things they said or did. And with people who have held positions of power, we talk about what they accomplished during their tenure in office.

This morning our readings tell of the birth of John and the beginning of his ministry. Unlike the names listed at the beginning of the gospel passage, John held no official office. He wasn't a priest in the temple like his father, Zechariah. His mother was a descendent of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first priest of the people of Israel. John could have claimed his heritage like a Roosevelt, a Rockefeller, or a Kennedy.

But as far as the average citizen of Galilee was concerned, John was a nobody who seemed to come out of nowhere. In fact, Luke tells us John was living in the wilderness when the word of God came to him and drove him to the waters of the Jordan River proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

I wonder how much John knew about his miraculous birth. I wonder how much Zechariah told him. Zechariah's first words, after nine months of silence, were a song of praise for God's faithfulness in the past and the promise of that same faithfulness into the future. He sang of John's role in God's future activity—that he would be the promised messenger we heard about from the prophet Malachi. John would prepare the way of the Lord by preparing the hearts of the people to receive God's salvation through their repentance and God's forgiveness.

I wonder how much Zechariah talked about that with John as he grew up. It was likely quite a bit. But John only began his ministry of preaching and baptizing when the word of God came to him. Maybe he was in the wilderness as a way to simulate a season of being mute like his father had been during Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Maybe he had heard his father's prophetic words for him so many times, but in order to come to know how God would fulfill them John needed to get away, to be in a place with no one to talk to, where all he could do was listen. Only then could John hear God's word that he was given to preach to the people.

As most of you know, my husband and I welcomed our first grandchild into the world this year. It has been amazing to watch her grow into a little person in just 7 short months! Since we don't live nearby we get frequent pictures of Adelia and have the luxury of video calls where we can see and hear her. But it's not the same as being around her every day.

Being a grandparent puts us in a position to watch and adore the development of a child in a way that I never could as a parent. We can focus on her achievements—like her first smiles, learning to scoot and crawl, and even growing teeth! We don't have to pay such close attention to the hard parts of baby-life—like tantrums or refusing new foods or not sleeping well.

Zechariah and John's story has touched me in a new way this year. As important as it is to remember and honor the achievements and the life of those who have died, I am considering now how important it is to convey a sense of God's blessing and activity in the lives of our children as they grow up.

We don't know what each child will accomplish in their lives so it's hard to make the kind of prophetic predictions Zechariah made about John. Let's think, then, about how we might bless our young people with the promises of God. We don't know the specifics of a child's future. Zechariah didn't really know how John's role as "the prophet of the Most High" would be lived out either. But we have promises we can teach and plant in the hearts of our children.

When we bring children to the waters of baptism, we make promises to raise them in the Christian faith. We promise to help them form relationships with other Christians. We promise to teach them about life with God through the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and all of the Holy Scriptures. We promise to pray for them and worship with them as they grow in faith.

And we make all these promises *so that* they "may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."

That sounds a bit like Zechariah's words for John. As the prophet of the Most High, called to prepare the way of the Lord, he would serve as one of God's instruments that would guide believers into the way of peace.

What if we could articulate these promises to our children more directly and throughout their lives? Often kids want to know why they have to do something, whether it's schoolwork or their chores or being polite to someone who is difficult to be around. Why? Why do we come to worship? Why do we go to Sunday School or Confirmation? Why do we serve our neighbors, volunteer in the community, or give gifts like the Lutheran World Relief animals?

What if we tell our children that God has created them for goodness? What if we said that we want them to know God so well that when they hear God's voice they will follow God's calling to be messengers of God's peace in the world?

So rather than wait to see what will happen with our granddaughter I think I will write an annual letter to her on her birthday. Since I didn't think of that until now, here's what I might write this year for Christmas.

Dear Adelia,

You have been born into two families made up of strong people of faith, the Ogrens and the Millers. God has been and continues to be the foundation of our families and we are grateful that God has provided such a warm setting of faith for you to grow up in. We are excited to share with you what we know and have experienced about God's love that comes to us through God's Son, Jesus Christ. He is the very heart of God, who came to the world to bring God's love to all people and all creation.

We trust that God is already at work in your life so that you can show His love in your own special ways. You may grow up to be a leader or you may be a good worker with other leaders around you. Your parents and grandparents understand that God has called us to teach others about God's love for all people no matter what place the world give us. This is your calling too, just as it is the calling of all Christians.

Over the years I will point out to you the gifts I see in you. I promise to listen to the ideas you have and the decisions you will need to make so that you can follow God's leading. I hope I can help you see God's gifting and purpose for other people, too, so that you can encourage them in their faith and their life callings.

In the words of Paul to the Philippians: "this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

All my love, Grandma

May we each find ways to encourage one another's callings as messengers of God's love and peace.

Thanks be to God! Amen