

Luke 1: 57 - Luke 2:7 Surprise #3
Newtonbrook United Church, December 13, 2009
Rev. Allan Baker

Today we are celebrating the third Sunday of our journey through Advent; our journey towards Bethlehem. Today's reflection is titled: Surprise #3, because we may have already had two surprises this Advent season.

The first Sunday of Advent we read a story about Mary being surprised that the angel Gabriel told her that she was to bear a child, and we learned that with God, nothing is impossible.

Last week we read about Elizabeth, an older woman who was surprised that she too was pregnant, and that her son would become a person that we know as "John the Baptist." All of us have an important role in God's mission in God's world. John's mission was to be a forerunner for Jesus.

This week the Gospel story begins with the birth of John, and ends with the familiar story of the birth of Jesus. In between there is a speech by Zechariah, John's father, a priest in the temple at Jerusalem. Be prepared for more surprises.

The story says; "On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father."¹

Apparently that was the common custom, but, surprise, his mother Elizabeth intervened and said; "No; he is to be called John."²

"They" objected. Nobody in your family is called John. Can't you just hear them saying you can't name him John, that's not done around here. It isn't the way that we do things here. Don't surprise us with doing something different.

Then, they turn to Zechariah and they ask him what name the child should be given.

Now it is important to remember that Zechariah was not only a priest in the temple, and that an angel named Gabriel had told him that Elizabeth would become pregnant. Not only that, but the child's name would be "John".

¹ Luke 1: 59

² Luke 1:60

Zechariah, being human, an old man, and knowing that he and Elizabeth were getting on in years, at that point did something very human, and very foolish. He doubted the angels' words.

The consequence was that Zechariah became mute - he could not speak.

When "they" asked Zechariah to name this child - after all "they" couldn't take the word of the baby's mother, Zechariah asked for a writing tablet. He wrote four words on the tablet; "His name is John."³

The story tells us that the "they" were amazed. It also tells us that "immediately" Zechariah regained his speech. "Fear came over all their neighbours",⁴ according to the story.

Are you surprised at this miracle that happened in our Christian Scriptures even before Jesus was born? Did you know about this miracle?

Here is another surprise - a story of the affirmation of Elizabeth. It is another story in our scriptures where a woman plays a significant role by upsetting the status quo. This action is in the tradition of civil disobedience that began in Egypt with Shiphrah and Puah⁵ - the midwives who saved male Hebrew babies from death - probably including Moses. In this story Elizabeth goes against the conventions of her society to do what the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah to do.

How willing are we Christians in the 21st century to defy the conventions of a consumption-driven, destructive society?

Maybe we need more women as leaders? It is women and minority groups who are better able to name the injustices of our society, just like someone coming in from outside can tell the occupants how stuffy the room may be.

Our scriptures are full of stories of how God comforts the afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable.⁶

³ Luke 1:63

⁴ Luke 1:65

⁵ Exodus 1:15

⁶ William Sloane Coffin, A Passion for the Possible, page 59

Zechariah, being a priest, when he found that he had his voice, succumbed to an occupational hazard; he made a speech. You can find it in Luke's first chapter and it is about his son, and the ministry that John will have.

The speech includes the prediction that John will be a "*prophet of the Lord Most high; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.*"⁷

I think that the key word is "PROPHET." That is John's role. As followers of Jesus, that is also a part of our ministry. Instead of preparing the way for Jesus, our challenge in ministry is to follow the way of Jesus.

Karl Marx is reputed to have said that religion is, "the opium of the people". He made that statement on observing the fact that, like a drug, the church in Czarist Russia lulled people, kept them quiet, attempted to provide a pastoral presence for people being beaten down by an unjust system of governance. Bruce McLeod once said that, the church in those days - and I would say many in our day - "*provided pious diversion while injustice flourished and peasants starved.*"⁸

That's what the powers of Empire want to have happen - save souls and keep out of politics. We have seen that happen in the past two weeks when the powerful in Ottawa slashed funding for an ecumenical coalition of denominations called KAIROS. Let me tell you a bit about KAIROS:

KAIROS represents, among other organizations, the United, Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches, the Mennonites and the Quakers.

KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives is a web of people and partnerships dedicated to a faithful and decisive response to God's call for respect for the earth and justice for its people. A faith-based ecumenical organization, inspired by a vision of God's compassionate justice, KAIROS effects social change through advocacy, education and research programs in: Ecological Justice, Economic Justice, Energy and Extraction, Human Rights, Just and Sustainable Livelihoods, and Indigenous Peoples. These programs are informed by, and networked with, approximately 21 partner organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East; about eighty local grassroots

⁷ Luke 1:76

⁸ Toronto Star, January 9, 1990

groups across Canada; as well as with countless other organizations, churches and individuals⁹.

At the conference that I attended at Queen's theological College in October, 2009, Lois Wilson, a past Moderator, was asked about what happened to our ecumenical coalitions. Lois responded by saying that the ecumenical movement of the past had been about the churches' MISSION. She added that, since we are now in SURVIVAL mode, we are not in mission.

KAIROS has been part of our MISSION as Christian churches - supported by the Mission & Service Fund and individual donations. I need to disclose that I make monthly contributions to both of these organizations.

Why do I do this? I do it because KAIROS, for example, has been willing to challenge the powers of a society that creates divisions among God's children and abuses the good earth that God created. Like Elizabeth, KAIROS has been willing to question the way things have been done.

KAIROS has named our way of life as an addiction to oil, for example. Policy papers have proposed alternatives as a means of moving towards a sustainable way of life for all of the creatures on earth, not simply humans.

In his report in the *Globe and Mail*, Michael Valpy wrote that:

Kairos has criticized overseas Canadian mining practices and drawn attention to ecological hazards in the Alberta oil sands. It has campaigned against bottled water in Canada and elsewhere and defended a Palestinian activist imprisoned by the Israelis for peaceful protests against a Canadian company building Israeli settlements on West Bank land.¹⁰

Faith is what drives this ecumenical coalition. KAIROS is a part of our faith and a part of our MISSION. It is a demonstration that God's Spirit loves God's

⁹ from KAIROS website: <http://www.kairoscanada.org/en/who-we-are/>

¹⁰ The *Globe and Mail*, Wednesday, December 2, 2009, [http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/social-justice-group-says-ottawa-cut-its-funding-without-warning/article1386190/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+TheGlobeAndMail-HYPolitics+\(The+Globe+and+Mail+-+Politics+News\)&utm_content=Google+Reader](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/social-justice-group-says-ottawa-cut-its-funding-without-warning/article1386190/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+TheGlobeAndMail-HYPolitics+(The+Globe+and+Mail+-+Politics+News)&utm_content=Google+Reader)

world, and that the church is to be prophetic in challenging the status quo - just like Elizabeth and Zechariah, and John, and Jesus.

A week ago at the fundraiser called, In The Christmas Spirit, I read a story written by Frank McCourt. It was called Angela and the Baby Jesus. In the story the doll that is the baby Jesus in the manger lies in the manger with its arms stretched up and out - open to the world. That is the kind of world that people who are involved in KAIROS are - God's Spirit moves them to embrace a world of hurt and pain; a world that is being destroyed by the rich and powerful, and the forces of Empire.

As we journey through Advent and approach Christmas, we know that we are approaching the time when we celebrate the birth of the One who said that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. God's abundance, surprise, is meant for everyone.

- Just like Elizabeth and Zechariah, we are called to challenge the conventions of the status quo.
- We all have a part in this Christian ministry.
- With God, anything is possible!

Hymn # 17 (Voices United) O Ancient Love

Questions for reflection:

When have you previously reflected upon the story of Elizabeth, Zechariah and John?

W.S. Coffin writes that God comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Is this a part of the mission for the Christian church?

What stories from the ministry of Jesus are stories of confrontation with the "status quo"?