

Texts: Luke 1:5-13, 57-80

Subject: Zechariah's Song

Theme: Coming to Us

4th Sunday of Advent; Dec. 22, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

Sometimes we just have to give up.

When the waiting and hoping and striving becomes anxiety, fear, and pain, we have to give it up. I was reading a blog by author Stephen Guise¹ writes about getting bit by a spider at age 25 and facing convulsions, a trip to the ER, and crippling anxiety about his health. He wondered what would happen next, feared going to sleep and being unable to protect himself, and the worry and stress became too much to bear. Fighting the anxious feelings, counting the butterflies in his stomach, and the hope of overcoming this problem drove him to insomnia, and increased mental anguish. It was when he gave up hope that he found healing. For Stephen, it was when he stopped trying to overcome an insurmountable obstacle, when he quit fighting, when he gave up, that he found peace. He says:

I stopped trying (and hoping) to not get butterflies in my stomach for no reason. I stopped caring about my breathing frequency and depth.

Giving up the fight against fear, worry, anxiety, and depression meant that Stephen could truly "let go." He found freedom in giving up, and was able to relax, find healing, and move forward.

This Advent we've gathered around scripture that tells of God's promises and the themes of hope, peace, joy, and today we come to love. But the story of Zechariah and

¹ <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/how-losing-all-hope-can-be-freedom/>

Elizabeth is one that didn't seem at first to be hopeful, peaceful, or joyful. Like Abraham and Sarah, this is a family that finds themselves unable to have children. In the community they would be seen as a failure. The expectation that Elizabeth was barren (was she really?) meant that she had some defect, or was being punished by God for some sin. They might be ostracized, pitied, or shamed. They were in their old age, and the hope of having a child might have been long gone. I have to imagine that when it came to having a child of their own, Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up. Sure, they prayed. Zechariah was a priest - he was *born* into a holy calling. When it was his turn - two weeks out of the year - he would be the one to go into the temple to make an offering of incense. This practice was symbolic of the prayers of the people rising to God. One day, as he was offering the incense, and all the people were praying outside the temple, he was visited by an angel - a representative of God.

The angel Gabriel promises Zachariah that his wife would have a son, and the boy would be named John. The experience of divine visitation is frightening, even for the priest. He is an old man, this life is all he's ever known, and he faithfully performs his duty in the temple. Naturally skeptical, he doubts, and is made unable to speak until the baby is born. Sure enough he goes home, and his wife becomes pregnant. Elizabeth saw this as a blessing from God - the miracle was finally coming to them!

For the entire pregnancy her husband is unable to speak. Is this a curse or a blessing? Did it mean he had only to listen? Did he go around with the tablet and writing instrument, scratching notes? What would he have thought about that whole time? When the baby was finally born, the whole community came to rejoice with them. This family that had lost hope had received a miracle from God. God was faithful to fulfill the

promise made to Israel, and was still working, still moving beyond expectations, in spite of doubt and fear and worry, and hopelessness. God's **love** was coming to the world, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and coming to us. This special child would be the one to prepare the world for the Lord, the coming savior Jesus.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we go about the duties of our day: work, shop, care for family. Maybe we've given up hoping for something amazing to happen. Maybe we're still fighting to beat back the fears and worries that creep up this time of year. How will the next year go? Will God remember me in my anxiety, my grief, my struggle? Is this the time when I will find freedom from pain? Sometimes we give up, and still, God shows up.

Zechariah couldn't speak for nine months. It seems to tell us that this priest - the one who has done the duty of his calling was no longer expecting an experience of the holy within the walls of the temple he served. He was so shocked to actually see the angel that he couldn't believe it. For him to be speechless was to be forced to sit back and watch what God would do through his family. Without his own effort, his rituals, without his work. John would announce the one who was bringing knowledge of salvation, giving light to those in darkness, guiding our feet into the way of peace.

When he finally opens his mouth and speaks, Zechariah sings to praise the Lord. He remembers the promises, the blessings, the way God has always shown up throughout history, working through those who were counted out, left behind, shamed, and marginalized. God's saving power were coming into the world - and John - whose name means 'The Lord is kind' would be born to prepare the way for the savior. Zechariah sings to share what he has seen and learned and known and believed.

God was coming to us. God *is* coming to us.

Every day we go through the routines of our lives, and for some, the hopes once held closely might seem too far off, and doubt is stronger than any expectation of ever seeing long lost dreams come true. For others, life seems dark, and the light is hard to see. Suffering has become a cloud around them and they are unable to find any way out. Giving up hope is the only way to survive. Sometimes that's what it takes - to give up on our own efforts, to shut up and listen to what God is doing right in front of us, in us, and through us. To give up on our own desires and egos, to see gifts and blessings all around in this church, in these families, in this community. Sometimes, when we give up, is when God shows up.

Giving up is what Christians are about, we are called to give up on our selfishness, on working for our own salvation, on freeing ourselves from our own sin, and giving up on trying to do everything on our own. When we give that up, we see the world in a new way, through the lens of the cross, where we realize our own efforts, our own works, our own badges of piety are nothing compared to the gift of grace we have received in Jesus our Savior. We have been given all we need, and are loved unconditionally regardless of our job, or wealth, or standard of living, or race, or height or beauty. We are loved and made lovable by the one who is love.

The end of the season of advent is the longest night of the year - technically it was last night. It is behind us now. The light is coming into the world - but in this community of faith we know that Jesus is already in it - born to take away the sins of the world, to free us from fear and doubt and despair, to guide us into abundant life, peace and justice, to lead us into love and service for a world in need. As we prepare to hear

and know the good news of the incarnation, God coming to us, we listen for God's love in our lives, for the Word that leads us into a new way of being, waking us from complacency and criticism, forming us and transforming us each day.

So, I'm giving up on trying to do everything myself. I'm giving up on thinking I have it all figured out. I'm giving up fear and worry. But I'm not giving up my expectations. I'm not giving up on God. I'm still expecting good things from God in my life, in this church, in this city. As disciples of Jesus - We believe God is still coming to us in Jesus, still working through the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe we have already been welcomed into the promise of abundance and eternity, through the cross, already prepared for a holy calling through our baptism, already joined with one another in the body of Christ. I am still expecting to be surprised by love, still waiting and watching to see what God will do next.

Amen.