

Luke 1: 57-80  
December 5, 2021

## Close to Home: A Foundation of Faith

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It's the Second Sunday of Advent, and we are closer to Bethlehem than we were a week ago, but miles to go before we rest beside the manger. Our theme this season is "Close to Home." Home has a lot of interpretations, especially this time of year. We are Close to Home, and not yet there. Last week, we explored the idea that we Christians are homesick for a world where peace prevails, the hungry are fed, and the captive freed. Homesickness can be used to transform our weary world with the thrill of hope that Jesus will be born and usher in the reign of God.

Today, we imagine what kind of foundation God is laying for us. When homes are constructed, the foundation is laid first so that the structure will be completed safe and sound. The foundation of God's new kingdom is being hewn out of stone, and the person who will prepare this foundation is Jesus' own cousin, John the Baptist. We often get so preoccupied with the coming birth of Jesus (and rightfully so!) that we may overlook the other miraculous birth that is featured in Luke's Gospel. John is born a few months prior to Jesus, to a pair of clergy of parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth and Zechariah are older and are past the age where it would be medically possible to conceive a child. Zechariah receives a visit from the angel Gabriel—"Good news! You are going to be a dad!" Zechariah is incredulous, and as a result, is struck mute and deaf throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy.

We arrive at today's joyful scene: Elizabeth has had a son; she insists on naming him John. When Zechariah confirms this name suggestion, his voice is restored and he proceeds to speak a blessing on his infant son. Zechariah's song, called the *Benedictus*, is the second of three songs of joy, blessing, and prophecy in Luke's Gospel. Luke tells the story of Christmas through poetry and song, and I can't help but marvel at the foundation the author is laying for the rest of the gospel.

Zechariah may be singing to his infant son, but his words resound for all of us. Regardless of whether you were born and baptized in a faith, or if it is something you encountered later in life, God is faithful to God's people. As scholar Amy-Jill Levine points us, "Zechariah provides assurance that despite the newness of the Christmas story, a rock-solid base secures an anchor. God is invested in history, from the international level to the personal one. This investment does not mean micromanaging, and it does not mean eliminating either free will or the role of nature, of wind and seas, droughts and blight. It means both concern for the world and all its inhabitants and support that this investment, the tradition of Torah and Gospel, will guide us toward the good."

Thanks to the miracle of modern cell phones, Ryan and I have pictures of both of our kids minutes after they were born. When I look at those pictures, as I occasionally do, I recall the warmth, exhaustion, and love of those first tender moments. Those first few days in the hospital and at home were setting a foundation of love. Later, when my children were baptized, the congregation made promises to nurture their faith, and by doing so, laid another brick in their spiritual formation. I think back, too, on my own upbringing in a Presbyterian church, where generations of church aunties and uncles taught, refined, and sometimes rebuilt my spiritual house.

As pastor here at Trinity, I see one of my most important roles is to listen and learn your individual stories and the story of this congregation. That also means that I spend time coaxing and encouraging you all to share your stories. To you, the story of how Trinity took a leap of faith and built a new addition to accommodate a day care, that might seem like old business. But to me, it shows how God provided when we lived into our mission. Or the story of how, for many years on a Friday afternoon, a dedicated crew of cooks, dishwashers, and servers served lunch at Let's Help. Or the story of how a phone call and an invitation from the Topeka Rescue Mission stretched our imaginations, and showed us how, even during a global pandemic, we could serve out neighbors in new ways. There are smaller stories, too—the stories of visits, and phone calls, and warm welcomes and hearty handshakes. The stories of baptisms and funerals and Christmas pageants and worship services. God may be in the background, but God is present in every one of these stories.

Vilmarie Cintron-Oliveri, former moderator of the PCUSA remarks, “Zechariah’s canticle in Luke 1 had such conviction. Having lost his voice for his initial disbelief, Zechariah regains it just in time to praise God for God’s mercy and to pronounce a blessing, a prophecy, to his son that would set the tone for John’s life and ministry. While the neighbors and relatives gossiped about the miraculous circumstances of John’s birth—circumstances that amazed as much as frightened them—they also worried, wondering, “What then will this child become?” (v. 66). Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit and knowing his son would become the “prophet of the Most High,” (v. 76) spoke words of vision to a newborn that grew strong in spirit and helped lay the foundation into the way of peace. In building God’s kin-dom, let us remember there is power in the words that we speak, to anyone, but especially to our young ones as we lay the foundation for their spiritual homes.”

What kind of foundation are we laying here at Trinity? How are you helping to lay the stones in another’s faith? What foundation of faith are you laying in your own life? Next week we will see God’s promises fulfilled as the baby John grows up in to a prophet laying a foundation for the arrival of Jesus. His story is our story, a blessing for all the ages. Amen.