

Best Supporting Act

sermon digest

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Luke 1:67-79

larry dipboye

The Canticles in the birth stories of Luke's Gospel stir images of a Rogers and Hammerstein musical drama. The play opens with Luke's narrative description of the setting: "In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah." Zechariah and Elizabeth are "righteous before God," but they are childless. Elizabeth is barren, and both are very old. The curtain rises on old Zechariah performing his priestly duties in the Temple. The Angel Gabriel appears with a revelation that Elizabeth will bear a son. The encounter is marked by fear, uncertainty, and doubt; and Gabriel leaves Zechariah dumbstruck for the entire period of gestation.

The curtain goes down on scene one, and the audience is left to wonder where this is going. Is this the Gospel of Jesus Christ or John? Why should the conception and birth of Jesus begin with a story about John the Baptizer? True, in the next scene Gabriel visits Mary, and the two pregnant women meet, and Mary sings the first canticle, "Magnificat"; but all of this is almost an interlude to the dominant story of Zechariah and Elizabeth lifted right out of the Jewish saga of centurions Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac.

The curtain rises again at the birth of John, and there is a debate at the rite of circumcision over the child's name. Consistent with the command of Gabriel, Elizabeth says, "John." The Hebrew name *Yohanan* is rich in meaning, "Yahweh has given grace"; but it is viewed by friends as a departure from tradition. Should not the son be named for his father? Finally, old, mute Zechariah writes, "His name is John." This is the dramatic moment when Zechariah's tongue is loosed. The old man breaks into a song inspired by the Holy Spirit and qualified by Luke as prophecy. The "Benedictus" floats above the anxiety on stage with tones of assurance and hope, but the song is only incidentally about John. The focus is on praise to God for raising up "a mighty savior," literally "a horn of salvation." God has remembered the covenant sworn to Abraham. This is a messianic song in which the infant of Zechariah plays a supporting role of "prophet of the Most High," who will "go before the LORD to prepare his ways." In the Gospel Academy Awards, John is not even a candidate for the leading role, but he is clearly the best supporting act in the coming of Messiah.

Raymond Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*) assures us that Luke's story stands without the canticles. Concerning the facts, Brown is right; but I have some difficulty imagining Luke without music, just as most of us have difficulty imagining Advent or Christmas without music. I am not sure that "The Sound of Music" would leave much to remember without the joyful song of Maria, "the hills are alive with the sound of music." Neither can I imagine Luke's story without Mary's "Magnificat," Zechariah's "Benedictus," the angels' "Gloria in Excelsis," and Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis." The canticles lend an integral flavor to the birth narratives. The message is more art than history, more inspiration than fact, more future than past. The audience to a stage play recognizes that real life does not unfold in neat segments of dialogue punctuated by sounds of music. Some of us may be more dramatic than others, but most would be prone to associate a lyric response to events in real life as a sign of mental breakdown rather than inspiration, but who is really qualified to make the distinction, especially at the stage in life in which we find Zechariah and Elizabeth? This is pure drama! Life sometimes imitates art, and there are events in life that can never be captured in prose, but Luke is right on target. The birth of Messiah is one of those moments in history that transcends the moment. The event cannot be contained in scientific history, and the message is better sung than said.

God acts through community and works through events. The "we" perspective of the "Benedictus" gives a sense that this is not a solo performance or a private moment to be relished by the priest or celebrated by antiquated new parents. A chorus of the faithful is in the background lending harmony and volume to the song. Just as the Jewish Psalter enriches our worship with the songs of the ages, the canticles of Luke add a third dimension to the moment of revelation. The song of Zechariah is God's message of salvation emerging from the rich heritage of the people of covenant. The triumphal tone of the canticle tends to mask the rest of the story. We can almost forget that the lives of the two babies in Luke will end in tragedy. John will die at the hands of Herod

Antipater (9:9), and the story of Jesus moves toward a Roman cross in Jerusalem. With all of the fanfare about Zechariah's priesthood, most scholars would date Luke after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. By the time Luke writes, the Temple has become nothing but a pile of rocks. Whatever "house" that is being restored, it does not appear to be the Temple of God.

A question that hangs over from the messianic prophecies is whether the Messiah was to be a solo act, a person sent by God, or a community event, the personification of Israel in the people. Luke's answer is "yes." It is both. Not even the one we identify as the Christ of God is a solo act, and his story cannot be told apart from the expectation of Israel, the faithfulness of people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the supporting role of John. That is how the story begins, and that is how it ends. It is fair to skip to the end, after the cross and resurrection to hear the final commission of church. The Messianic mission of Jesus the child of Bethlehem emerges as the Messianic mission of his body the church. So, we should not be surprised at the significance given to the supportive role of John, and we should not be hesitant before the supporting role that has been passed down through the ages through Christ's church. John wins hands down the supporting actor award, but the faithful of the ages are part of the supporting act from the beginnings in Israel to the final act yet to be unfolded.

God remembers. Zechariah's song is a doxology to the God of Covenant, the God who remembers and keeps promises. The miracle of a baby born to elder parents is overshadowed by the greater miracle of integrity in the promise of God. William Hocking suggested long ago that memory is a measure of time that contains intimations of eternity. The very idea that our lives fit into an eternal purpose of God and that the being of God transcends all beginnings and all endings finds expression in the simple human gift of memory. Certainly that is the foundation of history in Jewish thought. If God's people can preserve the covenant from the time of Abraham, what kind of memory must be endemic to the nature of God? The birth of John, the forerunner of Jesus, is an anchor in time to remind us of God's faithfulness.

We were living in Fort Worth. It was mid-June and the temperatures were soaring. Our second child was born on May 30, and we were trying to settle into new routines that included a fourth member of the family. Michelle was a two-year-old, a bit confused and frustrated by the little intruder into her realm of special child. She went out to play with friends in the heat and came into the apartment crying. She sounded a bit congested and for good reason. She had found gravel somewhere on the lawn and proceeded to stuff pebbles into her nose until she could no longer use her nostrils for breathing. We began to work on finding the right medical approach to the removal of the foreign objects from the child's nose, tweezers, q-tips, and pleading to blow into a tissue, all to no avail. Finally, we were down to two alternatives, negotiate or operate. If the child did not cooperate, we would have to head back to All Saints Hospital for emergency assistance. We decided to negotiate. After the rejection of several small offers, the child's mother said, "hurry and blow your nose so that we can go to the Zoo." In ten seconds the pebbles were safely in the trash, and the family was loading the car to go to the Zoo.

I do not recall any discussion of whether we were bound by law or parental ethics to keep our promise or a further negotiation to lower the expectation of our daughter. We wanted our child to associate her parents with integrity of word and deed. Do we expect any less from God?

The Benedictus of Zechariah blesses the God who keeps promise across the barriers of time and politics. John is not the main act, but the best supporting act in the faithfulness of God.