

“A Hopeful Message”
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:57-79 *NRSV*

New London UMC
First Week of Advent

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Roger Gench wrote a commentary on our reading from Luke that suggested thinking of the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth as a chart that shows how fear and anxiety spike downward, and joy and gratitude spike upward (*pp. 32-33, pastoral perspective, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Volume 1; David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press*).

I thought it might be helpful to actually see what he suggested – so I’ll be using this white board and markers to draw the “story chart.”

Starting Point: Zechariah and Elizabeth got married and anticipated having children.

Down: Years went by and Elizabeth never became pregnant.

Up: While Zechariah was serving as a priest the angel Gabriel appeared to him.

Down: But Zechariah didn’t believe Gabriel’s “good news” that Elizabeth would have a son named John, who would prepare the people for the coming savior.

Down: Because of Zechariah’s disbelief Gabriel informed him that he would be mute and unable to speak until the good news comes to pass.

Up: Zechariah goes home. Elizabeth conceives. When her cousin Mary comes to visit, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy and she is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Up: After Mary returns home, Elizabeth gives birth to a son. Friends, neighbors, relatives rejoice that God has shown great mercy to Elizabeth.

Down: Eight days later they gather for the circumcision and naming of the child.

Everyone expects the baby to be named after his father, Zechariah. But Elizabeth insists his name is to be “John.” So then they ask Zechariah about this. And he writes: “His name is John,” which confirms it. Everyone is amazed and stunned about the name.

Up: And then Zechariah is able to speak again, and starts praising God!

Down: But the neighbors are afraid because they don’t know what to make of all this.

Up: However Zechariah has had MONTHS to think about what Gabriel said to him. And now Zechariah is ready to praise God and prophesy about the mighty savior God is raising up from the house of David; and how his own son, John, will be called the prophet of the Most High, and will prepare the way of the Lord.

Down: But obviously an eight day old baby isn’t going to get to work on that right away.

You know what all these up and down lines remind me of? Let me draw it for you. How the main cable on a suspension bridge swoops up and down. It has to stretch from the anchor point, past the deck, up to the top of a pylon or tower, back toward the bridge

deck, and up to the next pylon or tower, and back down past the bridge deck to the other anchor point. There are high and low points along the way, but the main point of building a bridge like this is to span the distance from here to there. The bridge makes that connection happen.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's son, John, can also be seen as a bridge. John came to span the distance from the law and the prophets of old, to the time fulfilled when the promised Messiah would save God's people. As he prepared the way for the coming savior, the anointed one of God, John would also revive hope for the future. John would call God's people to a baptism of repentance as he helped them understand that forgiveness of sin is the way of salvation. John would ready them to embrace the incarnate Son of God's teaching, preaching, and healing.

John's bridge of preparation and connection can symbolize what we hope for today. In the last part of Zechariah's prophecy we hear:

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.* *(Luke 1:78-79 NRSV)*

I don't know about you, but during this pandemic I have felt like we've been sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, longing for the tender mercy of our God, longing to see God's light break through, for a new day to dawn. We have been longing for a bridge of hope to take us from what has been, to what will be. We have been longing for interpersonal bridge building and connection – instead of this sense of ever widening separation through polarization. We have been longing for change . . . but are we prepared to receive what we have been longing for?

The prophet Malachi said that just as gold and silver need to be refined to remove impurities and to be strengthened, we also need refining. We need our hardness of heart and opinion to be melted out in repentance. We need to find new strength through forgiveness. Only then will we be ready for God's new bridge, God's new creation. Only then will we be fit for loving one another and God with us. . . . God with us. . . . Perhaps the bridge we seek is already here? Emmanuel, the hope of the nations, the light that still shines in the darkness, the path of forgiveness and grace, the way of truth, and the one who invites us to live a new life together with God forevermore. Jesus connects us to the fulfillment of all that we hope for.

Amen.