

Sunday, December 2, 2018
Zephaniah 3: 14-20

4th & 5th Grade Treasure Finders

Each year the 4th -5th Grade Treasure Finders Class looks at a selected reading for the Covenant Advent Devotional. This gives us a chance to read our Bibles and to try to understand what we are reading. Many of the children have just received their very own Bibles from the church.

This year our task was to read from the Old Testament and to see what the words we were reading meant and to try to figure out what this passage might have to do with the Advent Season and the birth of the Christ Child.

Here are some of their comments. What would you add?

This passage is talking about succeeding (with God's help).

It is about finally completing something after trying multiple times.

God is protecting you: God is trustworthy, God loves and cares about you.

Don't be afraid.

God can help all people, God can help people with addictions.

God sent Jesus to help us know that God is in our hearts at all times.

You can talk to God all the time.

God sent Jesus to be our savior and to show us God's love.

Don't give up because God is always there and will help us.

Merry Christmas from our class:

Ethan Chung, Emma Faulkner, Sylvie Lederer, Shelby Speas, Owen Wise, and Madison Hanosek
and their teacher: Judy Oeder

Have you ever asked God to answer a special prayer? Did it take a long time to get an answer? Or maybe you haven't received an answer yet.

Waiting, Waiting, Waiting--- you think, "How much longer must I wait to hear your answer, God?" In the meantime, think of all the daily answers God gives: Waking up in the morning, taking your first breath of the day, seeing your loved ones yet another day, feeling sunshine on your face, being able to speak words of love to all you meet, putting one foot in front of the other as you walk where God leads you this day, hearing the wonderful sound of children playing, being able to drive your car to the grocery or the doctor or to a friend's home, being able to pay your bills as they come due, having clothing to wear, enjoying the heat and running water in your home, having plenty of food to eat or purchase at a restaurant, calling up a good friend, taking a trip, attending church, watching or attending a football game, playing with your children or grandchildren, being allowed to read your Bible anytime you want to read it, helping others as God asks you to help, being able to rake your leaves or help a neighbor rake theirs.

God never forgets, God's timing is always right. Sometimes we do not get answers when we want them, but God is so good. Sometimes what we ask is not the right thing for us in God's eyes. God has the big picture and He knows, from the beginning of time, just what each of us needs. Read your Bible and pray. God hears every word. God loves each of us. God guides each of us through His written word and through other people He puts in our path. Do not be afraid. Waiting is hard, but there is so much to enjoy while we wait for our answers to prayer.

Think about a special answer to prayer. One close to my heart concerns my Brother, John, who passed away in August and was buried in October. John has been ill for many years. He had heart disease, kidney disease, lung problems, and rheumatoid arthritis. Through it all I asked God to help me let my brother go if that was the best thing for him. I visited John every month this last year. At the end my brother was under the care of Hospice at home. It took every bit of energy for John to be enveloped in a lift to deliver him from his lift chair to his hospital bed. He was in so much pain, I knew God needed to take him soon. His companion of 39 years, Judy, gave her all to care for John. Judy has Fibromyalgia, Lupus, a heart defect, COPD, etc. Judy and I would put John in his lift and haul him down the ramp to the truck and take him out for ice cream or to a drive through to get something to eat. John was always happy and did not complain. He was full of love for everyone. God allowed me to have some very special times with my brother. A couple of nights before my brother passed away, Judy heard him talking to my Mother and Father who are already in heaven. Just hearing about his conversation helped me know that I will see John in heaven someday. I also realized that John would be the first to visit with an older brother, Chris Kenny, who lived only a short time after he was born. Just knowing that John is with so many relatives and friends in heaven and that John was no longer in pain, calmed me. I think God took time for me to prepare me for my brother's death.

David sang Psalm 13:6: "I will sing unto the Lord, because He hath dealt bountifully with me." I try to follow David's example and sing to God, because He has dealt bountifully with me.

The roles of language—spoken, heard, thought, written and read—are defining ones in all our lives, our culture(s), our world... and in our relationship with God. Indeed, without language it is hard to even imagine how belief or faith in something Divine, or any way of expressing it, would be possible. Today's passage shows us the beauty and power of human language—spoken and written—in a couple different and interesting ways.

In today's text we have the miraculous act of God's angel Gabriel removing Zechariah's ability to speak, as a punishment for questioning the angel's words that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son despite their advanced age—"your prayer has been heard"! We are reminded both of the power of spoken prayer—and of how disabling the lack of speech is, when the mute Zechariah can only communicate with the faithful by "motioning to them."

Zechariah's voice would be restored only after the promised birth had occurred. By that time he has become adept at writing in order to declare the baby's name: "He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John'", at which point God "unmutes" him. Seemingly the use of language to declare the infant's name, not the birth itself, was the magic act required to restore Zechariah's speech. God's gift of speech can be withheld by God just as easily as it is given.

Now, let's look back at the very beginning of the gospel itself. In Luke's words in verses 1-4, we are reminded of the beauty and power of written language. Writing was invented by humans long after the discovery of speech and the creation of spoken languages; things like alphabets and writing implements had to be invented as part of writing.

It is only because of written texts that we have detailed knowledge of Jesus's ministry and message, as some of his outlandish spoken words and radical ideas were remembered, got written down, and copied and passed around, perhaps during his lifetime and certainly in the aftermath of his death on the cross.

Luke informs us that he has assembled an account of Jesus's life using a process that we modern folks might call "research": He has (1) read all available sources; (2) strived to be as accurate as possible by using texts based on "eyewitnesses and servants of the word"; and (3) tried to write clearly with his audience in mind ("write an orderly account for you"). Luke is writing for "Theophilus"—"lover of God"; that name can and should be understood as meaning any one of us!

In this season of thanks and giving, let us give thanks to God for the gift of language, and let us as fellow "servants of the word" use our language to praise God and to celebrate the coming birth of Jesus.

We all know this story. Someone purporting to be an angel shows up at Mary's house in Nazareth and tells her God thinks she is special and wants her to have a baby that will be God's own son. I can hear echoes of that old Bill Cosby (before all the trouble) routine about Noah and the ark.

"You're going to have a baby," a voice tells her.

Mary, "Riiight."

"And the baby will be the Only Begotten Son of God."

"Riiight"

"He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will never end."

"Uh, who are you really? A baby? Listen, I've been a good girl and I'm engaged to Joseph."

"No problem. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

"Riiight."

"Your kinswoman, Elizabeth is having a child in her old age. You see, nothing is impossible for God."

"What!? Am I on candid camera?"

Well, we know the outcome of this encounter. How many of us would say, if we believed we'd had a call from God to some particular task, "Let it be done to me as you say?" I know I've argued and have heard others say they argued with God about being called to serve in a particular way. There are excuses always, Noah asks, "What's an ark? What's a cubit?" We say, "I don't know enough. I might get into trouble. It's too hard."

But Mary says, "I am the servant of God." She trusts that God will see her through, will provide what she needs.

Prayer: Gracious God, grant me Mary's courage when you call me to service, and confidence that you will be with me as I answer your call. In Christ's name, Amen.

December 6, 2018

Terri Hayes

Luke 1:39-45, 56

What a blessed joy one feels when someone comes to visit!

What a blessed joy one feels when you feel the movement of an unborn child!

What a blessed joy one feels to celebrate a birthday!

What a blessed joy one feels when extra hands are around to help!

What a blessed joy one feels when supported by others!

What a blessed joy one feels when helping others!

Mary, mother of Jesus, went to Judea to see Elizabeth, who was also expecting in her older years. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, her baby moved in her womb. A blessed joy of life fluttering inside Elizabeth! What a joy to feel a baby move in the womb! Elizabeth felt the Holy Spirit and felt blessed along with being overjoyed.

I loved watching both daughters share a smile when their baby moved in their womb. It is a blessed time for a mother to share with the father or a friend share with a friend.

In faith, we need support and need to help each other.

Mary and Elizabeth needed each other. They needed to bond since both were expecting under different situations. Did they have faith to keep promises to one another or share their faith? Was Mary there to share her personal faith and give support when needed?

Faith is personal but not private. Faith brings us together. Faith is a journey. When faith is shared, life is renewed!

My life was blessed with mounds of joy giving birth to two wonderful daughters. Now, they have blessed me with greater joy, grandchildren! What a blessing to feel joy, excitement and love from friends, family and little ones! May this time of year bless you with joy! The joy of expecting! The joy of faith! The joy of love!

Friday, December 7
Luke 1:46-55

Dick Sharpe
The Magnificat

These verses complete Luke's telling of the long visit Mary had with her distant cousin Elizabeth. Both women had become aware of their miraculous pregnancies and were sharing their equal praise of God for their good, but mysterious fortunes. Elizabeth had just recognized Mary's situation and exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is your child. What an honor it is to have the mother of my Lord come to see me!"

Mary responded to Elizabeth with her song, also called the Magnificat:

My heart is overflowing with praise of my Lord;
My soul is full of joy in God my Savior.
For God has deigned to notice me, and after this,
All people will call me the happiest of women!
The one who can do all things has done great things for me.
Holy is God's name.
God's mercy rests on all believers in every generation.
God's strong arm has swept away the high and mighty,
Set kings down from their thrones, and lifted up the humble.
God has satisfied the hungry, sent the rich away with empty hands,
And has not forgotten to be merciful, as promised to our forefathers.
Oh, Elizabeth, my soul magnifies the Lord!
My spirit is rejoicing in God my Savior!

Three months later, Mary left Elizabeth and returned to her own home to await the birth of her son. Elizabeth's son, John, was born shortly after Mary left.

Luke supposedly was a physician (and certainly was a poet) who claimed to have interviewed many people, including an elderly Mary, who had witnessed these events.

My telling of this wonderful story was done with great assistance from J. B. Phillips in his translation, *The New Testament in Modern English*, and Walter Wangerin, Jr. in *The Book of God; The Bible as a Novel*.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Happy 20th birthday, dear granddaughter, Annalise Michelle!

Background

Zachariah was a high priest who had a visit from the Angel Gabriel as he was dedicating incense to the Lord, a most exalted position in the priesthood. Both Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth were elderly and she had been barren to this point in her life. The Angel Gabriel declared to the priest that the Lord had answered his prayers; Elizabeth would be having a son and his name would be John. The baby would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would guide many people of Israel to the Lord their God. Zachariah questioned the angel's prophesy, and due to this doubt, his voice was quieted. The Angel Gabriel told him that because he doubted his words, he would be unable to speak until the child was born.

In Elizabeth's sixth month, the Angel Gabriel spoke to and blessed another woman, Mary. Mary visited Elizabeth during the last months of Elizabeth's pregnancy. When she greeted Elizabeth, the babe in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Both babies were blessed.

Verses 57-80

After Elizabeth gave birth to a son, on the eighth day the bris occurred. The circumcision and naming of their child would happen on this day. Zachariah was still mute. As the mother was asked to name her child, the guests expected Elizabeth to say, "Zachariah" after his father. Instead, she said, "John". The guests questioned the wisdom of this move and asked Zachariah, still mute, to write down the name he wished for his son to be named. He wrote "John". Both Elizabeth and Zachariah were honoring Gabriel's request. As Zachariah wrote the name, his voice returned to him and he praised God.

Zachariah prophesied that John would prepare the way for the Lord. He would give knowledge and salvation to the people and forgive their sins. He would give light to those in darkness and guide them into the way of peace.

Miracles do happen! Mary, a virgin; and Elizabeth, a barren, elderly woman both giving birth to two holy men.

Praise God!