

Sermon: My Messenger

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, December 5, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Communication technology is supposed bring us closer, to help us to be more connected with one another, so why is it that we still feel increasingly disconnected? When I open up my smartphone (yes, I was critical of calling a phone ‘smart’, but have come to realize that phones are getting smarter), when I want to connect with someone, let’s say my boys—Justin or Neo in Montreal—there is an increasing array of ways to do so. I could phone them, or FaceTime them, or Lime them. I could text them, email them, or Instant Message them. When in an actual emergency, or simply an emergency in my mind, I could even ping them using an app called ‘Find My iPhone’, play a loud siren, or even lock their phones until they smarten up and reply. I guess that’s part of the privilege of being the head of the family in iCloud universe. Of course, ever since the pandemic began, who could forget to mention Zoom. That communication platform seems to trump all others. We use it in our personal lives, in distant learning classes, working from home, or even to attend worship services in the comfort and safety of our homes.

So, with such an increasing arrays of ways to connect with others, why is it that we still feel like we are alone? In a world of Zoom, or FaceTime, or Instant Message, when we are all supposed to be wired in, why do we feel increasingly disconnected? Might I suggest that perhaps, we are not listening to the right message, from the right source?

Zechariah was a messenger send by God to tell us something: something old (in the best prophetic tradition of his time), and yet something new, that still has the power to transform and renew, to anyone who cares to listen.

The story of Zechariah, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, is quite interesting. He was a minor priest belonging to the priestly division of Abijah, in the time of King Herod of Judea. Both him and his wife Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron, and both were righteous in the sight of God. But they got a problem, that is Elizabeth was barren and they were both getting old. At that time, being without a child was consider a mark of

shame for a woman. It was sometimes seen as an act of God, a punishment for some unspecified sins.

One day when Zechariah's priestly division was on duty, and he was serving at the temple. He was chosen by lot to enter into the inner sanctuary, the holiest of holy, to burn incense to the LORD. To a minor priest, this was a great honour, a rare opportunity to serve God in a way that was traditionally reserved for the high priest. At the same time, it was also a dangerous duty because to enter into the holiest of holy, one had to be ritually cleansed of all unrighteousness. The Scripture contains a number of stories of unfit or unprepared individuals who had burned incense to the LORD, and how they were punished by God, most severely.

So Zechariah went inside to the inner sanctuary, while the rest of worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the LORD appeared to him, standing beside the altar of incense. In the Hebrew language, the word 'angel' is 'malach', which also means 'messenger'. It often describes a supernatural entity sent by God to deliver a message, keeping in mind that God also sends people to speak on His behalf. For example, Malachi was a prophet of the Lord. His name in Hebrew is a construct of 'malach' and 'i'. 'Malach' is messenger, and 'i' is the first person possessive suffix, or 'my'. So Malachi: 'my messenger'.

Thus God pronounced through the prophet, in Malachi 3:1, "*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.*" (Malachi 3:1)

So when Zechariah encountered this messenger, in the temple of the Lord, standing beside the altar, he was gripped with fear, but the angel assured him, "*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord..... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" (Luke 1: 13-17) Evidently, even when Zechariah was well advanced in years, even when he was performing his priestly duty to bring people's prayer to God, he himself was secretly praying that God would grant him an offspring.

Nevertheless, Zechariah doubted and replied, "*How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.*" (v.18) For that moment of disbelief, the angel of the LORD sealed his mouth until all that

had been prophesied had come true. So for the next nine months, Zechariah was unable to speak, while his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to a boy.

At the eighth day when the infant was to be circumcised, when Zechariah gestured that the boy was to be named 'John', his mouth was opened, and Zechariah praised God and prophesied. What he said was recorded in Luke 1:68-79,

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued
from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
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.”

Zechariah, at that moment, was more than a father who pronounced blessing upon his child. He was more than a priest who brought people's prayer to God. Zechariah, at that moment, was a messenger of God, in the best prophetic tradition of Elijah, of Isaiah, of Malachi and many others before him. Sent by God to bring to us the most important message of his time, and of our time. That is the message of peace!

Peace! Not in the way false prophets proclaimed in the time of Jeremiah—they proclaimed a false security that nothing can harm the people of God, because they are in “the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD”. (Jeremiah 7:4) Peace! Not just in the feeling of tranquility in the midst of uncertainty and instability (although that wouldn’t be bad to have). Peace! Not just in the cessation of hostility, or in the temporary absence of war (although if ever achievable, it would already be a monumental achievement of humankind.)

What Zechariah proclaimed in this blessing was a true peace, peace from above, peace from the LORD God Almighty who cancelled all our sins, not counting our inequities against us. A true peace that humankind once had but lost ever since the time of Adam and Eve. A true peace that is not returnable as if going back to Eden; a true peace that is not obtainable by our own efforts.

In due time, we would come to have a glimpse of that peace, through the child that was blessed by Zechariah. John the baptizer would come, as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*” (Luke 3: 4-6)

In time, we would come to know that peace through Jesus Christ, our saviour, our redeemer, our reconciler. And God through Christ “*reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*” (Colossians 1:20)

So in this season of Advent, or as some would call it the Christmas shopping season, go and enjoy your friends and family. Connect with them, instant message them, or simply spend time with them, hopefully with everyone fully-vaccinated.

But know that if you truly desire peace, if you truly thirst for shalom, connect with God through Jesus Christ. Only by Christ, in Christ, and through Christ, will we come to experience, to encounter and to live in peace.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.