**Sermon 12-9-18**

**Paul Purdue preaching**

**God Speaks Through Our Experiences**

On the day after Thanksgiving, Connie drove off for work from our Air B & B cabin at 5am. Our displaced dog anxiously nuzzled me awake, so we set off on a long predawn walk. The first rays of sunlight broke the horizon to dance on the glassy lake waters. As if called up by the light, fog rose from the lake gliding on an easy breeze towards deeper waters. Geese assembled a formation raising their loud morning praise. Pale bands of back-lit blue, yellow, lavender, and pink radiated from a neon cranberry core. On the edge of the sunbeams, thin tufts of wispy white clouds broke away escaping into the bluing sky. Wanting to capture the beauty of the moment, I took out my phone in hopes of posting a trophy on Facebook. However, no matter how I adjusted the frame or played with digital filters, my photos failed to capture the moment. That sunrise like so many experiences transcends our words.

Indeed, upon closer review, my photos accurately showed the lake at winter pool with floating docks cast about, stationary docks offering ramps to nowhere, an old tire fish attractor, and about 60 feet of muddy denuded shoreline. The sun was glorious, but the beauty of my sunrise walk more likely sprung from the joy of having boys under our borrowed roof for the first time in three months. Even our most mundane holy experiences transcend photos, phrases, punctuation and paragraphs.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's experience is one of songs and silence. Zechariah will sing after a long silence. God speaks to us through the Word, experience, and meditation. But, even as each of these gracious tethers pull us closer to God, they do not restrict God’s love.

In our story the lot fell to Zechariah. With hundreds of thousands of lay priests, this was a once in a lifetime experience. Every morning and evening the priests placed handfuls of sweet- smelling incense on the altar. Its sweet aroma ascended to God from the red-hot coals. Smoke billowed through the temple. I wonder how it smelled? I wonder if the morning sunlight danced off the mountains or painted the desert sky an electric lavender? Did the evening sunset cast the temple limestone in a golden yellow? Luke’s verses cannot contain all Zechariah saw and felt. Elizabeth and Zechariah's experience of the holy ran deeper than the pages of our holy book. God’s unbounded holiness and love cannot be hemmed inside punctuation and prose.

But imagine yourself prayerfully pouring the incense over hot coals, the smoke ascends and an angel arrives to answer your prayer: “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son. You must name him John (Yahweh- is-gracious). The child will be a joy and delight. Many people will rejoice. The Holy Spirit will fill this child, Yahweh-is-gracious, before his birth. Yahweh-is-gracious and through John (the Baptizer), God will bring many people back to the Lord. The power of Elijah will enfold John and his message will turn the hearts of parents back to their children and the wayward back to right paths. John will get people ready for the Lord’s coming.”

All of us would be stunned and struggle to believe what we just saw. So before the story ends, Zechariah is muted by his encounter with God’s angel. Perhaps, our holiest experiences always still our tongues leaving us speechless. Maybe silence is the proper response to a holy moment. After all, Paul tells us in Heaven’s perfect love, preaching ends. (1 Corinthians 13) Paul speaks of “Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19), and “God’s peace that surpasses understanding.” (Philippians 4:7) Perhaps, lost in deepest wonder, love, and praise, Zechariah cannot find his words for nine months.

As we look to the Bible, let us remember there is a God who transcends the words in this book. There is a Spirit that inspires beyond Luke’s testament. There is a Savior whose grace extends beyond “the days of Herod” or the time of Caesar Augustus. Let us not mistake the Bible for God. The Bible touches the Holy but does not bind it.  And God is still at work. Holy experiences still occur. The Spirit still speaks. God is writing new stories in our lives. Indeed, “If anyone be in Christ, there is a new creation. Behold, everything is made new” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Advent never ends. The Creator stands ever ready to break into our worlds remaking them with holiness, justice, and love.

Last week I declared: Christian living is impossible apart from tradition and a community of faith. You cannot understand faith apart from a faith tradition, for God works in community and creates tradition. We do not read the Bible alone- a holy wind blows at our backs. This week, hear my declaration: “We can’t understand the Bible or God without seeking to experience the Holy.” Seekers find. The Gospel is not a legal contract dropped from heaven to be signed by us, but a series of divine encounters and lessons, wherein God invites us to enter into relationship with the Holy. The Bible is about our experience; our experience matters. Experience helps us understand God.

Wesley spoke of “holiness of heart and life” understanding that those ancient stories could become our modern experiences. Wesley’s Rules on Scripture teach us to “Read the Bible seeking to know the will of God. Be resolved to do God’s will when you learn it. Keep an eye open for the analogies of faith. Find the connections and harmony with God’s grand themes. Pray. Pray knowing that ‘scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit that inspired it.’ Frequently pause and examine your heart and life in light of your reading. And whatever light you receive in study and prayer apply that light immediately, and God’s Word will become God’s power in your living now and forever.”

Prayer brings us in harmony and understanding with God’s Word. Prayer interprets our experiences. If we detach the Bible from prayerful experience, reducing the Bible, its letters, and forgetting that God’s Spirit transcends the Bible, then the Bible will become a soul deadening rule book. But the Bible is a story of “Emmanuel” God with us.  God is gracious and still at work. The Spirit still stuns us into a holy silence and our hearts still break free in song. The sun rises amid the coldest winter. God works even as Herod sits on the throne. The Spirit still speaks. Jesus’ love never ends. The Creator is still making all things new.

Silent for nine months, God incubates a song in the silent solitude of Zechariah's soul until the day comes to name the child. Luke tells us they were going to name him Zechariah after his father (ignoring the wishes of his mother, after she pushed life into the world with joyous squeals of a new life). They argue with Elizabeth and discount her voice. Perhaps this trusting in what “they” know resonates even today? Do we not still discount some voices, trusting in what we received while ignoring the possibility that God might be making something new? “None of your relatives has this name.” But Zechariah wrote on a clay tablet: “His name is John -Yahweh-is-gracious.”

Immediately Zechariah's tongue is freed for praising God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sings a tender and prophetic lullaby. Imagine Zechariah holding the longed-for child. Imagine a song incubated from within a deep silence. Hear Zechariah pour justice and love into this child. Listen as Zechariah seeds this tiny baby in his arms with truths that will shape the fiery and fearless prophet John the Baptist. I imagine this dad, his long dormant voice cracking with newfound use and deepest love, wept for both joy in the present and fear for the future as he sang:

“Bless the Lord our God, who comes to deliver and help us. The Lord has raised up a mighty savior for us, as God promised through the holy prophets long ago. God shows mercy and keeps covenant with us. Oh John, serve the Lord without fear, as long as you live. Oh you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, you will go before the Lord to prepare the way. You will tell of salvation and the forgiveness of their sins. Oh, through God’s deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, the dawn will bring light to those who sit in darkness,

for God comes to guide us along the path of peace.”

Luke tells us that the child grew up, becoming strong in character.

This is a book of new hope...of the deepest experiences of the holy. And there is a God who transcends the pages of this book. There is a Spirit that inspires us even as it inspired Zechariah’s song. There is a Savior whose grace extends beyond “the terrible days of an evil King Herod” and is still sanctifying our lives. The Spirit is still speaking. God is not done writing new experiences and stories in our lives. “Lift up your voice and sing, Rejoice, in Christ there is a new creation. Behold, everything is made new” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Come let us open this book of holy experiences- even as we open ourselves to the Creator who inspires it. Hear the Good News- experience Christ’s coming in this moment, listening as the Spirit continues to speak for “Behold, all things are being made new.” Amen.