

Sermon 12-17-23  
Paul Purdue preaching

*When the time had come.* Elizabeth spent five months in seclusion sometimes feeling judged, she spent 9 months of pregnancy, she spent hours breathing and pushing John into the world. Zechariah spent 10 months in silence. When the time has come to raise a child, begin school, start a career, end a relationship, retire, move, welcome a new choir director, forgive, or take stand- we can't be sure just what is next, we have no choice but to step out into the mystery where God waits with us.

*When the time had come for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy.* I wonder if a few of those neighbors and relatives who spoke of God's mercy were the same ones who reproached Elizabeth before? Forgiveness can allow celebration.

*On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John." They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.*

Luke does not tell exactly who "They" are other than "relatives and neighbors". The exact identity of the "theys" in our lives may not matter. If someone wants to use the pronoun "they"- it seems simple and kind to listen and honor their choice! However, at times we use "they" when we mean not "us." "They" often offer unsolicited opinions without seeing us or listening to our hopes. "They" think they know a better name than Elizabeth who now nurses John: *"oh honey, none of your relatives have that name: John! Zechariah is a great name after his father. It's tradition. I mean, Yohanan, John, (God is gracious in English) is a nice name. God is gracious but maybe Elizabeth you are just too caught up in this!"* Did Elizabeth have to endure 8 days of that? Big events like weddings, funerals, new babies, bat mitzvahs, baptisms or Christmas dinners can bring in all the neighbors and relatives and produce a lot of stress. We can struggle to understand and support loved ones who hold a different vision than we do, especially if their sense of calling breaks traditions. I imagine Mary's dad argued, "no, no, no" when Mary said "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be according to God's Word." When we come to help relatives and friends, remember the best help begins with asking, hearing, and honoring.

"They" try to disempower Elizabeth and when she is resolute "they" start working on Zechariah. *"They began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God. All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked*

*about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?"*

After Gabriel's rebuke, ten months of silence, and hearing the neighbors and relatives badgering Elizabeth, not all of us would have leapt straight into praise. Zechariah chose rejoicing! The whole scene: a new baby, a husband affirming his wife, the joy of the rabbi blessing little John ("God is gracious, what a lovely name for a child") and finally Zechariah no longer silent but singing praise to God: these beautiful surprises jolt all the people into awe and the joy. They begin dreaming what God might do through that child. "What might this child be?"

Next time we baptize a baby or one speaks up in church ask yourself "what might this child be?" Ponder the wonder of these tiny humans whose bodies, brain, and worlds expand each day. There is such wonder in our baptismal vows, "through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price" and we rejoice, welcome, and pledge, "we will surround this child with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others." *All their neighbors were filled with awe... talked about it and asked, "What then will this child be?"* What God might do through our children, our youth, our college students, our church.

"How often do you allow yourself to be amazed?" Rev Cecelia Armstrong and Rev Lisle Gwynn Garrity's( [A Weary World Rejoices @ A Sanctified Art](#) ) question implies that awe, wonder and amazement are a choice as much as cynicism, distraction, or indifference are choices. "How often do you allow yourself to be amazed? Wonder is all around us- can we recognize it? As we learn to rejoice in a weary world, can we live in a way that allows wonder and amazement to surprise us often?"

Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley asserts "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world" and awe is good for us! ([\\*How a Bit of Awe Can Improve Your Health: Experts say wonder is an essential human emotion — and a salve for a turbulent mind](#). By Hope Reese in NY Times Jan. 3, 2023)

Dr Keltner believes awe and surprise is especially critical in the age of social media. "We are at this [cultural moment of narcissism](#), self-shame, criticism and entitlement; awe gets us out of that". Awe does this by helping us get out of our own heads and "realize our place in the larger context, our communities." Awe, surprise and wonder are good for us. "Keltner found that awe [activates the vagal nerves](#), clusters of neurons in the spinal cord that regulate various bodily functions, and slows our heart rate, relieves digestion [and deepens breathing](#)." Sharon Salzberg, a leading mindfulness

teacher and author, also sees awe as a vehicle to quiet our inner critic. Awe, she believes, is “the absence of self-preoccupation.”\* (NYT)

Maybe we are drawn to the Christmas Story because there is so much awe, wonder, and hope within it?

Zechariah sees a vision and is struck silent  
Elizabeth pours blessings on Mary.  
Mary belts out the Magnificent- a song of justice and hope  
At the naming Zechariah finds his voice and breaks into praises  
Everyone is filled with awe wondering who exactly will this child be  
The angels sing Glory to God and peace upon those receiving the good news  
The glory of the Lord shines around the shepherds  
Everyone was amazed at the shepherd's story .  
Mary will treasure all these things in her heart  
Simeon sings “let your servant now depart in peace  
for my eyes have seen God’s salvation in this child I hold.” Anna will prophecy  
Mary and Joseph will be amazed by what people say about Christ at 8 days old  
The Magi will rejoice with exceeding great joy  
And open their treasures and lay them before Mary and the Christ child

How often do you allow yourself to be amazed? Can you for a moment lay aside your inner Biblical critic and drink in the grandeur of faith, hope and love?

I was maybe 12 riding back from a swim meet in West Virginia. For some reason, we were not carpooling with the Bridwells, only Mom and I were in the car. As we drove we kept seeing black deposits along the side of the road and wondered if they might be coal. We were chatting about the rocks when Mom, like Moses seeing the burning bush, turned to the side. Like treasure hunters we began investigating the black rocks bringing a few specimens home to test in our fireplace laboratory. I do not remember the results, but the adventure sparked mystery, awe and joy.

Hope writes in the NYT “When William B. Irvine, a professor of philosophy at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, wants to feel a sense of awe, he turns to science. “Science is everywhere, all of the time,” he said. An alluring object or part of nature, for example, is a “piece of an incredibly beautiful puzzle.” We often just think of the piece instead of the big picture, he said, “and that’s a pity.” But once we think about the context, about what went into its creation, awe will follow.” (NYT)

Will we open ourselves to seeing the vastness? Will you allow yourself to be amazed? Come let us open the Bible not for argument or easy answers but for awe and inspiration. Come and pray asking God to tune you into the universe's beauty all

around us. Come and ask God to tune you into the human decency and goodness all around us. Dr Keltner tells us that simply observing people doing good things is one of the most reliable ways to spark awe. (NYT) Our souls smile when we see someone help someone across the street. Come volunteer and observe others doing good.

Come, let us get outside and practice amazement. Come put down the phone and enjoy unmediated reality.

Researchers tell us Dance, worship, singing, and rituals all spark awe. Will you light a candle and watch it flicker? Will you twirl around the living room reenacting the Sugar Plum Fairies waltz? Will you sing as Wesley admonished us “lustily and with good courage- not half dead or half awake” the songs of faith, hope, and love? (Wesley's Directions on Singing. UMC Hymnal)

In this holy season, come allow yourself to be amazed. amen.