

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

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Luke 1:5-20

On this the fourth Sunday of Advent, Advent which talks to us of God's coming, we read of how God came via his messenger, to Zechariah. He comes to this priest, just one of many priests – the priestly calling went by family, and as the families grew, so did the number of priests – he comes to this priest chosen at seeming random, by lot – and God shows that he knows all about his personal circumstance.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's abiding grief was that they were childless. In those days the blame for this (and yes, it was blame) was laid on the woman, but the grief was real for both partners. They got on with life, Elizabeth at home and Zechariah in the temple, keeping busy, doing what had to be done, but beneath all they did was that awareness of their lack. And which of us has not got some grief or sorrow which lurks beneath the surface and adds a faint – or not so faint – tinge to every part of life? Some loss or regret, some guilt or shame. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth tells us that God knows. God knows what we do not tell anyone else. God knows what our deepest longings or fears are. And God cares.

The herald for God's Messiah could have been chosen from any family. There was no prophecy about him, other than the one alluded to by Gabriel, that before God's servant appeared Elijah would return. God could have chosen anyone to be that person who would live "in the spirit and power of Elijah" and herald Jesus to the nation, But God chose to give that role to a longed-for child born to elderly parents who had about given up hope.

When God comes to us, he comes to us, not to people in general - though that too – but to people in particular. And the wonder of God is that he came do this for each and every one of us – come to each one of us in particular within the compass of coming to be with humanity in general. That is our God.

Of course, sometimes it is hard to believe this. People who think that faith means never having a doubt need only look at Zechariah. He was a priest

of God. His whole life and all his work was to serve God and to help the rest of the people to be able to come to God with confidence, presenting their offerings, making their sacrifices, offering their prayers. Zechariah was at the heart of all that. And yet, when the angel promises that God will give him what he has most longed for, Zechariah finds it hard to believe. “How will I know that this is so?” he asks.

And which of us has not had such a moment? Which of us has not at times even not dared to ask God about what is most important to us, because we dare not name it and then be disappointed? Zechariah can hardly believe this good news, and what if the promise does not come true? How will he cope with the disappointment? And so he asks for a sign.

When I was a child learning the Christmas story, I distinctly remember that we were told that Zechariah was made mute because he was unbelieving. It was shown to us as a punishment given not him for daring to disbelieve an angel of God. How dare he question? Where was his faith? We were given the idea that Zechariah had somehow let God down and was a disappointment to his creator. I don't know if that is how you were told this as well?

But if you read the story carefully you will see that in fact what was going on was that Zechariah was made mute as a sign to him, an ongoing sign, that he could in fact trust the words of Gabriel, God's messenger. “How will I know that this is so?” he asked and now every time he tried to speak, he would remember that this is so. Every time he had to write things down and hold in his opinions, he would remember that God had promised, and God would do it. If God could make him mute, then God could work the wonder of giving him and his wife a child in old age.

God came to Zechariah in his particular circumstance and showed that he knew, he understood and that he had just been waiting till the right time to do something about it. And far from being angry at Zechariah's wavering faith, God gave him the asked for sign to help him keep his faith steady in the months that would follow.

And God came to Zechariah in his particular circumstance, and in addressing that, he was also addressing the circumstance of the nation, waiting with longing for a Saviour to come. John, that as-yet unborn baby, would fulfil not only the hopes of his parents but herald the fulfilment of the hopes of the nation. And that is how God works. Sometimes we pray and long to see God reach down from heaven to do something big. But that has so rarely been God's way. God works through individuals. God intervenes in the stories of individuals, and it is from there that his power and love ripples out into the bigger picture.

And so the story of Zechariah is one which can encourage us too, with our own hidden griefs and worries, to know that God knows and that when God comes to us, it is to us, as we are, with our faith and our doubts, with our joys and our sorrows, with the whole of our past history, that God comes.

Read Luke 1:26-38

Sing: 285 The Angel Gabriel from heaven came

Gabriel was having a busy time of it! First Zechariah, and now Mary.

With Zechariah he spoke to the man's hopes and dreams and regrets and sorrows. With Mary he brought a message that pre-empted her dreams. She was not yet at the point of actively seeking a child, even if she expected her coming marriage would bring one. God came to her when the time was right for her to listen, when she was full of hope and plans and God disrupted her plans and hastened on her hope and changed the assumed pattern of her life. Because God does that when he comes to us.

God changed the pattern for Elizabeth and Zechariah, a pattern they had come to accept because they had no alternative. For Mary the pattern changed before she had lived it. But when God comes to us, the patterns of our lives are changed, because when God comes to us, our thinking, and so our activities and our priorities are changed.

When Gabriel promised Mary a child she also had a question. Zechariah's was a question of belief – how will I know that this is going to happen? Mary's is a question of procedure; "How can this be?" She is not asking for a sign, but just for information. Maybe at the back of her mind she thinks that Gabriel may have the wrong woman! How can this be?

And in telling her how this can be, Gabriel tells her more about the child she will bear. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David....And of his kingdom there shall be no end!"

And so we see how when God comes to us in the particular, what he does affects far beyond our own hopes and dreams. God's plans for the world are built on God's interventions and coming to individuals and what grows from that.

When the baby John is born, Zechariah, who has had nine months of no speech to think about this, shouts aloud that this baby, this son of his will be and already is a sign that God listens to his people and sees their distress. He has reflected on his personal distress, and how God has seen

and mended that, and from that he extrapolates to the distress of his people, saying that God will and indeed already has seen and heard and cares and is changing things.

Zechariah's mutism has given him the time and quiet to reflect, something we all need and so seldom have or make for ourselves. And the conclusion that Zechariah has drawn is the right one: that it is because God comes to us as individuals and cares, that we can be sure that God also sees and knows about the woes of nations and of the world in general. God

knows and God will act – through the individuals who respond to his calling. Like John. Like Jesus. Like Mary.

Mary famously says: "Here am I the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary puts herself in God's hands to allow her life's story and pattern to be changed. She allows herself to learn to think differently and so to act and prioritise differently. Later, when she has her reflective time and goes to visit Elizabeth, she is able to voice her hopes when she declares her Magnificat – her psalm of praise to God, not just for her baby, but for what this means in terms of God seeing and hearing and helping his people.

God comes to us as individuals and weaves our stories to make them part of something far greater, part of the story of God and his world.

So this Advent draws to a close, this Advent, when we think of God coming, how has God come to you? How have you listened? How have you prayed? How have you believed or questioned? Or how will you? Advent isn't over yet, and even when it is, and Christmas comes, the promise of Advent is never over and the promise of Christmas confirms it, when God comes to us in Immanuel, which means God with us.

God is with us in our personal lives, in families and lack of them, in joys and sorrows, in hopes and disappointments.

God is with us in the upheavals and changes that our nation and our world is facing. In the challenges to what is right, in the hopes and disappointments and in the urge to care and change things.

God is with us in the church, as we grow and change to meet the needs of the time in which we live and the people to whom we must bear God's good news.

God comes and God is with us and God has promised never to leave us. So let us give thanks.