Light Shines On…Those Who Wait

Luke 1:67-79

Buckingham Church

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Light shines on those who wait. Anyone out there waiting on something? How about the end of Covid (I heard Trevor Noah this week suggest the end was in sight because we only have 9 more Greek letters to go through)? Maybe a diagnosis or healing for a medical problem? Word about a job, or a new place to live? People to get serious about dealing with climate change? What are you waiting on today?

Elizabeth (the patron saint of infertile women everywhere) and her husband, Zechariah, two of the most underrated characters in the Bible story, knew a great deal about waiting. The neighbors and family just didn’t understand why she didn’t get pregnant. Had she committed some sin that God was punishing her? No, she and Zechariah were both very good people, faithful and loving to each other and everyone else, too. Their pitying looks tore Elizabeth up all the time, as did the babies born to her sisters and cousins and neighbors, one after one, as though it was the easiest thing to do.

She waited. He waited. Years passed into hopelessness and sadness. You know how it feels when you want something so much and it just doesn’t come? That ever happen to you? That’s how they felt, month after month, year after year. Till all possibility of a child seemed out of reach.

Waiting is so hard. Ask any child who is waiting for Christmas morning, a small test that begins our lifelong training in how to wait. Of course, God had also been waiting a long time. From the beginning, one might say, at least from when things began to go terribly wrong with the human experiment. God was waiting for people to get it right, to figure out love was better than fear and hate, to figure out community was more important than the individual, to figure out that God believed in our capacity to create a just, compassionate, creative, and peaceful world.

But year after year, decade after decade, millennium after millennium, things only seemed to get worse.

Which is when God stopped waiting and decided to make a bold move, a world-changing move.

What I love about this story is that one piece of this world-shaking move comes when God reaches to these two people who had a clue what it was like to wait and despair and takes away their waiting as a prelude to coming in Jesus. God could have come to any woman; there were many faithful women who could bear children without problem, I am sure. But God chose Elizabeth, deliberately, I believe, to send a sign to the world that things could change that didn’t seem possible. God chose Elizabeth to send a sign to the world that sadness could be turned to joy, even when the odds were stacked against that. God chose Elizabeth because God wanted this whole event to be soaked with hope. God chose Elizabeth because God saw her pain, Zechariah’s pain, and knew that in one stroke, that pain could be turned to possibility, not only for them, but for their people, for all of us.

Because, Elizabeth and Zechariah are the parents of John the Baptist, the one who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus, his cousin. John the Baptist, who stood up to kings and priests and doubters and power-mongers of all kinds with a fierceness born of faith and a hope for possibility against the odds baked into his DNA.

I want to say to Elizabeth and Zechariah, “be careful what you wish for,” because I’m not sure John the Baptist was exactly what they had in mind for their only child. He was a little bit out there as a prophet, living in the desert, making powerful enemies.

But he told all who waited that God was coming, and they needed to be ready. This beautiful song sung by Zechariah at John’s birth reflects what he, Elizabeth, John, and Jesus deeply hoped. I think some of the most beautiful words of all scripture are at the end of this song: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in the shadows, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

To give light to those who sit in the shadows, waiting.

We know what comes next in this story. Jesus is born, and lives, and dies and rises. Humanity still doesn’t get it right, but light shines on those who sit in the shadows, waiting, trusting, believing, hoping against hope like Elizabeth and Zechariah and God.

There is something in each of our lives, no matter how old we are, that is waiting to be birthed. It is the divine spirit in us, breathed into us at our birth. It is the light of Christ. It is the body of Christ alive today, which we remember and re-commit to each time we eat and drink this holy meal. Sometimes we need to stop waiting and seek out that light, believing that we can be part of God birthing a world of peace and possibility. What are we waiting for? Sometimes we need to ask ourselves that question, and then we need to follow the light. Amen.