

December 2, 2018

“Unexpected: Unable”

Luke 1:5-25

What word or words do you associate with the Christmas/Advent Season? Let me throw out a few to see if any of these resonate: decorations, music, family traditions, yummy desserts, memorable presents, candle lit worship . . . Or how about any of these words? Busy, overscheduled, overwhelmed, overeating, overspending. How about these two words? Silence and seclusion? That’s how Zechariah and Elizabeth celebrated their first extended Advent season.

How about this word? UNABLE. Zechariah was Unable to speak and Elizabeth was Unable to have children.

Maybe all of us can, at some level, identify with feeling ‘Unable’ all year-round. Unable to get the job or get the good grade. Unable to save money or afford the Christmas present you really want. Unable to measure up; to some standard (“high bar”) or to someone. Perhaps you’ve been Unable to get beneath the surface in a friendship, or even start one. Unable to tell someone how you really feel; how they have hurt you deeply – or how grateful you are for them, or how much you love them – or that you forgive them. Maybe you’ve been Unable to ‘kick the habit’ or climb out of depression or admit you were wrong or fight the disease or answer the hard questions. Maybe you are Unable to pray with any conviction; you feel like God isn’t even listening. “But the angel said to him, ‘Zechariah, don’t be afraid for your prayer has been heard.’” (Luke 1:13) ‘Which prayer are you even talking about?’

Walter Wangerin reflects on the “prayer [that] has been heard:”

“Who knows when Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed the prayer the angel mentions? Surely it was long ago, before they had grown old. The prayer was a plea to bear children, of course, so it must have begun soon after they had married. It must have grown more anguished as longer and longer grew the time when God did not answer it. But after a certain age reality must have persuaded the childless couple to stop praying for the impossible.”

“By now, they had probably forgotten the prayer itself. Surely they believed that its purpose was past – and that the answer, long ago had been, ‘No.’ But here is the first of our lessons today: that God does not forget our prayers. It is in the fullness of time that He answers them . . . when to answer at all does the most good for the most people! And that is the second lesson: that the particular and seeming-private prayer becomes, in God’s omnipotent answer, a universal [blessing] And you, my friend – you thought your older prayers had gone unanswered . . . and you thought your personal praying had nothing to do with anyone besides yourself and a handful of intimate folk But your prayer is never yours alone. It is also God’s, you know.” (from *Preparing for Jesus*, p.38)

Some of you know Elizabeth's sorrow of being Unable to have children of your own. You prayed and you prayed, just like Elizabeth and Zechariah, but no child. Some of you prayed and are still praying for a wayward child; or praying to be rescued from an addiction to pornography. Some of you have prayed that the debt you are swimming in would be dealt with once-and-for-all. But it's only gotten bigger. All these unanswered prayers can make it hard to believe, yes? Maybe this Christmas you find yourself Unable to believe . . . to really believe . . . or believe as deeply as you once did.

Zechariah knows a bit about the struggle to believe, doesn't he? He says, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now and my wife is well along in years." (Luke 1:18) Like us, Zechariah wanted concrete assurance, some kind of solid proof. I feel sorry for him. He sort of gets his hand slapped for not buying into Gabriel's declaration right away. Maybe we don't get the whole conversation here in Luke 1. He does warm up to the idea that God will answer his prayers from long ago – and then some; that he and Elizabeth will bear not only a son, but the forerunner to the Messiah. He finally believes what the messenger angel says; that his son will be the one who Malachi said would "go before Him in the power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers to their children . . . to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:16-17 which quotes parts of Malachi 4:5-6) Zechariah believes the UNEXPECTED . . . the UNBELIEVABLE.

And this belief gives birth to some action; first, to some impressive charade skills informing the other 750 priests and Levites something amazing happened in the sanctuary while they were praying for the people of Israel. He tries to signal to them that help is on the way. And then, Zechariah's belief moves him to play charades with Elizabeth, AND initiate an intimacy with her that he may have given up on long ago.

And what about Elizabeth? We'll talk more about her next week but a few questions are in order. Does she wonder what's gotten into her aging husband? How long until she becomes, and knows, she's pregnant? It says "soon" but what does that mean? How does all this affect her prayer life? How (and what) does she eventually tell others as John the Baptist grows within her? We'll find out when she connects with Mary a few months later. What must it have felt like for Elizabeth to lose the label "UNABLE to have children"?

This Advent, put yourself in the Story. Imagine being Unable to speak; or Unable to tell anyone else what's going on inside of you. Maybe you don't have to imagine this because that's become the way you live – just keep it to yourself and keep to yourself. Maybe this Advent – while many are celebrating Messiah's first Arrival (Advent) and waiting for His Second Advent – you find yourself Unable to believe. Unable to . . . you fill in the blank.

The Good News of Christmas – and the rest of the year – is that God seems to show up precisely at those times when we feel most helpless; most Unable. **It turns out that when we come to**

the end of our own abilities, the UNEXPECTED grace of God shows up in surprising and UNBELEIVABLE ways.

As we celebrate communion this morning, we're reminded of our inability to take care of the one thing that does us all in; our sin and our self-sabotaging ways. But that's why God sent His one and only Son into the world. Not only is God ABLE to surprise priests and pastors with His very presence, or make jaws drop by surprising people with UNEXPECTED children (who come into our lives AND CHURCHES in all sorts of ways); but He's also ABLE to deal with the sin that separates us from Him – and gets us all turned around and upside down.

No matter how UNABLE you and I may feel this Advent season, let's trust God for the UNEXPECTED.

Guided Prayer:

“God, I feel UNABLE to _____.”

“God please show up in this specific _____ part of my life.”

“God, I will wait and watch for Your UNEXPECTED arrival.”