

First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2021
Scripture: Luke 1: 5-22
Rev. Kristie Finley, Sermon
The Meaning of Memory

Zechariah gets the answer to his prayer for a son, than he cannot tell a soul. He did not have the benefit of the offering of Sarah's beautiful liturgical dance to express what might not have even been expressible in words. Sarah was thoughtful in creating her offering, which reminds us that we do not always need words to preach, to illuminate God's words. Thank you Sarah. When Zechariah went out to the people who were praying, to the people waiting for his holy words, he would not have an American Sign Language interpreter to help. He would have tried to pantomime that an Angel came to him, and told him his old wife would have a son, a son who would turn people back to the Lord. At your next family Zoom, try adding that to your charades game. I don't think Zechariah got his message across. But, it would become one of their memories...

In my research, I discovered that this particular pericope, or text selection, is not in the common lectionary at all. Which surprised me. The announcement of John the Baptist's birth sets the stage for what is to come, sets the stage for Jesus. So, again, one of the reasons I love diving into the Bible are the surprises, and the ways in which our memories of stories can be reshaped as we reread them. Veering off the common lectionary, such as we are in using Amy Jill Levine's book, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, allows us to study scriptures outside the ordinary. Luke's telling of the announcement of John's birth, with its rich imagery sets us on the path to Bethlehem and Christ's birth, and Jerusalem and the cross, it is a powerful way to begin the Advent season. That imagery sticks in our memory...

Amy Jill-Levine invites us to imagine what it would be like to be standing outside the Sanctuary that day, praying. She asks us to savor the scene knowing that not only words can trigger memory, she speaks of "The magnificent building, priests and worshipers, Jews and pagans, from Europe, Asia, and north Africa, sounds of Levites singing and children laughing, the smells of incense, and animals..." Sounds and smells conjure up memories in an instant. Smell is strong, think of all of us who love to smell a baby's head, or the pine in the forest, or the scent of a loved one. I smell Estee Lauder's Youth Dew and my mother, gone 50 years, is right there. One of my son's texted me last night to ask how my father, his granddaddy's house always smelled like a Christmas tree, even in summer. My father had pine trees around his house, and in southern California, the windows were usually open. Scent triggers strong memories...

This story reminds us of the promises of God. That God remembers, even though we may feel forgotten. Today many feel forgotten. The memories of holidays past flood us, and we feel forgotten because we think we are unable to live out those memories another year. But, if we are creative we can combine our past memories with new ones. Teaching the advent story using the crèche has long been a tradition. The manger scenes many of us set up during this time. We place the pieces all over the house and each day move them as they journeyed towards Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph would arrive first, then the shepherds and sheep, and Jesus on Christmas day, with the wise men arriving on Epiphany. This is still possible, over FaceTime

you can still be together it's a great excuse to play! We pass on the story through our memories...

In this story, Zechariah and Elizabeth may have felt forgotten as they continued to pray throughout the years for a child. But, God hadn't forgotten them, and in this older couple's joy we are reminded once again of God's promise. Just as rereading the stories of scripture allows us to reshape our understanding of them, during this time, if we use it wisely, we have the opportunity to graft new branches onto those memories, and to remember that God holds memories of us, too, we are not forgotten.

Many of us have painful memories, and I am not saying that those memories can be changed. They can be reformed, made a little less painful if we remember that God has memories of us. That God was with us during those painful times, and God felt our pain. But God is always our comfort, our security as well. That even with all the painful memories of his people, God still choose to come and be among them, us to share on an even deeper level. To know us more intimately.

Here in Luke it is clear, the connection of memory and our history. Memories connecting the church and Israel, connecting us with our Jewish brothers and sisters. Like a master weaver memory weaves back and forth throughout the Bible the threads that create our story, makes us who we are. Like children who love to listen to the stories of their babyhood. Through these stories and our memories we are bound together.

Maybe human speechlessness helps God to be heard? If we dwell in the stillness that we are invited into during advent, this time of waiting, the Holy Spirit will fill us too, like John the Baptist, and we will hear more clearly God calling us. God sending us out into the pain of this world to be comforters and holders of memories.

Zechariah meets the Angel Gabriel in the sanctuary of the Lord, and is surprised and terrified by this encounter. You would think this would be the very place he would expect to encounter an emissary of God! We should remember the words that the Angel Gabriel speaks to Zechariah "Do not be afraid." These are the same words used to quiet the hearts of Mary and the shepherds. Do not be afraid, something that we cannot promise, but which God can. Take these words of the angels, and let them be your mantra during this season. Let them be the comfort and hope with which we feel free to hold our old memories and create new. Our final hymn is O Come, O Come Emmanuel. A psalm in which we can hold memories for others, which right now they are unable to hold. Knowing that as we sing God holds all, our memories and us. Amen.