

Zechariah, the Righteous Priest

Hespeler, December 08, 2024 © Second Sunday of Advent

[Luke 1:5-14](#), Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Philippians 1:3-11,

If you read the story of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, you will find that one of the most important characters in that story is a king named Herod the Great. He is the one who meets the Magi when they arrive in Jerusalem searching for a newborn king. He calls together the priests and scribes to answer their question as to where the Messiah should be born.

Herod is also the one who asks the Magi to come back to him and tell him where the child is and, when they don't come back, decides to send his soldiers to Bethlehem and kill all of the young children there for fear that this Messiah might take his kingdom.

And since, by the way, we know that Herod the Great died around 4 BC, that gives us a pretty clear date for the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus must have been born sometime before 4 "Before Christ," which I know messes with our calendar no end, but there you have it.

Matthew vs. Luke's Nativity

Herod the Great is all over the story of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. He is the great malevolent presence, the villain whose villainy moves the plot forward. The story wouldn't work without him.

Imagine my surprise therefore when I flip over to the nativity story in the Gospel of Luke. Where is Herod the Great in that story? Nowhere! Far from being the main antagonist, he is completely absent. The chief villains are instead Roman officials like Caesar Augustus and the Governor Quirinius.

One Small Note

But there *is* one small note at the very beginning of the Gospel. As the Gospel story opens, there is a description of the father of John the Baptist. **"In the days of King Herod of Judea,"** it says, **"there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah."**

Now, there are actually a few "King Herods" in the Bible, but that seems to be a reference to the one known as Herod the Great. Many scholars take that as an indication that, despite the fact that Herod plays no role in Luke's story of the birth of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke agrees with Matthew that Jesus was born before King Herod died.

But I am not so sure. I think that there is actually a whole lot more going on in those few words of introduction than that. I think that there is a whole story being told in those few words and I'd like to try and tell that story to you.

Herod and the Priests

Zechariah would never forget the day when he was ordained as a priest of the Lord. It had happened in the days when Herod was king over all Judea. And that was the source of so much scandal. Herod thought that, as king, he got to decide who served as High Priest. For example, he once removed one High Priest and installed another who was the brother of his wife. Then, when that High Priest wasn't loyal enough, he had him murdered within the year!



And that was just one example of Herod's meddling with the priesthood. Unsurprisingly, his blatant nepotism and use of the priesthood as a tool of his own political interest only lowered the esteem of the temple in the eyes of the populace. How could such a corrupt and dysfunctional institution possibly mediate the relationship between the people and their God?

Worthy Priests

And that is what made his own position so meaningful to Zechariah. He was not a *High Priest*, of course. His position was so lowly that Herod was probably not even aware that he existed. Zechariah gained his position because God (and not the king) had chosen his family as one of twenty-four to serve in the temple.

What's more, Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, was descended from none other than the OG High Priest, Aaron himself! She had more of a claim to the high priesthood in her little finger than any of Herod's choices had in their whole bodies – or at least she would have if she were a man.

And so, though he was nothing more than a small cog in a temple institution that seemed completely corrupt, Zechariah decided that he was going to be the one to make a difference. He vowed that both he and Elizabeth would be **righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord**. That, if nothing else, would set him apart from the complete mess that had overtaken the temple **“in the days of King Herod of Judea.”**

Zechariah did this because he knew that it was the right thing to do. He did it to go against a culture of corruption and self-interest that had overtaken the temple. The only question was whether God would notice. Would the faithfulness of Zechariah be enough to trigger the salvation that the nation needed?

Fruitless Service

As the years went by, the answer to that question increasingly seemed to be no. Zechariah did his best. God had chosen him to serve in the temple – and, yes, he did believe that when he was chosen by lot it was God making a choice, calling him to serve by name. Zechariah knew that his very existence as a priest made him a living challenge to King Herod who thought that he got to decide who could serve God.

Season after season, Zechariah did his best to serve with integrity. He maintained the noble traditions of worship of the Lord and resisted the lure of wealth and power that led the chief priests astray. He quietly did what needed to be done, interceding for the people with constant rituals of prayer and doing what he could to communicate God's grace to the people.

But it all seemed to have no effect. All the people could see was the corruption of the temple – a rot that had set in from the top but that seemed to have permeated it through and through. They began to avoid the temple, finding that it did not help them in their relationship with God. They continued to pray, recognizing their need for God, but Zechariah increasingly found that, when he was inside sacrificing or offering incense, they found it more helpful to pray outside.

A Message to Zechariah?

The increasing fruitlessness of the temple institution seemed to be a message to Zechariah that all of his hard work was bearing no fruit. But there was another far more personal sign of his failure that bothered him. His wife, Elizabeth, could not have a child. They tried and they tried for years, but nothing ever resulted.

This lack of fruitfulness devastated Zechariah. It was not his own personal disappointment that bothered him, or even that he felt heartbroken for Elizabeth who longed for a child. It was the knowledge

that, if he failed to produce a son, his own priestly line that that went all the way back to the time of Moses would be broken forever. That seemed to him to be a failure that was a judgement of him. It seemed near impossible to bear.

But so it went. As the years went by, he kept hoping for change. But nothing happened. Herod died eventually, but he had so thoroughly corrupted the temple by making it a political tool that the institution only festered.

And nothing changed for Elizabeth either. Month after month, no life stirred within her and they began to fear that very soon there would be no months left. It would cease to be after the manner of women for her.

Those were the things that Zechariah was feeling when his section's turn of duty came up and he set off to Jerusalem to do his temple service one more time.

An Offering of Incense

The lot fell to Zechariah that day. He had been chosen – chosen by God it seemed – to go into the sanctuary and burn the incense upon the altar. It was a task that had always felt so meaningful to him.

He would take the mixture of stacte, onycha, and galbanum that had been blended with pure frankincense and then beaten to a fine powder, and he would pile it up on the altar of incense in a great mound. Once he had lit it on fire, it would send up a sweet and aromatic smoke that he found pleasing.

But more than the smell of it was the sight of the white smoke climbing heavenwards in a straight line. He liked to imagine it ascending directly to the throne of the God of Israel – a sign of God's close attendance to the fears and concerns of the people.

It made Zechariah feel as if he was given the privilege to personally bring the concerns of all the people directly into the heart of God even though the people were not here – even though they prayed outside, stubbornly rejecting their corrupted religion.

An Extraordinary Experience

But on this occasion, something truly amazing happened. As he breathed in the smoke, he calmed and he felt a great sense of expectation settle over him. Something was about to happen.

When the figure appeared, soft and insubstantial at first, like a being made of the smoke itself, he did not know what to think. Suddenly every sense in his body was heightened and he felt as if he was transported to another plane of being. A great trembling came over him, but he wouldn't exactly call it a sense of fear – at least it was not like any fear he had experienced before.

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you," the being seemed to say. And Zechariah knew that his faithfulness had not been in vain.

A Promise and a Sign

The promise that Zechariah received that day was very personal. He would have the son that he had always dreamed of. The impossible would become possible; Elizabeth would conceive and would have a son.

But he knew that this promise, as welcome as it was, was not just for the two of them. It was a sign. Just as Elizabeth's womb, which had resisted for so long, would burst forth in new life, he knew that this was a promise that his faithfulness in the midst of a corrupted temple institution would also not prove fruitless.

He had felt as if he was getting nowhere for so very long. Surely those who were only bent on using the faith of ancient Israel to serve themselves – to enrich themselves or to pursue power and political domination – would continue to win. The small group of righteous priests who believed in what they did, would be forgotten as obscure and misguided idiots.

But now, because of this promise, he knew that God had not forgotten him. God might have bided God's time, but God would not tolerate such things forever. That was the promise that Zechariah would cling to – even if he had to cling to it in silence while he waited a little bit longer.

The State of Christianity

I will admit that I sometimes get discouraged by the state of Christianity these days. I am not talking about the declines in membership or attendance that have struck the great majority of churches in recent years. There is something else that troubles me more.

I despair when I see people using the Christian faith as a tool to advance their own personal or political goals. I see people employing Christian leaders and teachings to persuade people to vote in ways that are ultimately against their own interests. I see them using the Bible (or bizarre interpretations of the Bible) to persuade people that they must hate immigrants or minorities or other marginalized people when the Bible teaches so clearly and consistently that we must do the opposite.

Alongside that, I see Christian leaders enriching themselves to the extreme and living lavish lifestyles while their donors only suffer. I see others using the power that they have amassed in their organizations to abuse and harass their own followers in abhorrent ways.

It is enough to cause many to lose their faith altogether, which it has indeed done in many cases. How many today, like in the story we read, are **“praying outside”** of the institution. They are holding on, however tenuously, to their faith in God, but they have lost all respect for the institutions of Christian faith.

The Situation in Herod's Time

What we don't realize is that that is the situation that we encounter in the opening of the Gospel of Luke. That is why Luke's first words after his prologue are, **“In the days of King Herod of Judea.”** These words are not to set the date of the birth of Jesus. Luke will carefully set that in the next chapter. These words are meant for us to understand what was the state of the temple in which Zechariah served.

Herod was, without a doubt, one of the worst offenders in the history of Israel when it came to using the religion of Judea for his own personal and political goals. Everybody knew it and the people had lost respect for the temple institution because of it.

Faithful Zechariah

And so, I like to think that Zechariah would understand many of my own frustrations – serving within an institution that had been used by some to such nefarious ends. I marvel at his ability to be **“righteous before God, living blamelessly.”**

How did he do that for so long without losing heart – without giving up? I don't know. But the fact that he did inspires me. The fact that God noticed and launched a renewal of the faith through his son, John, gives me hope.

I don't know how righteous I am before God. Sometimes I wonder. I would also not claim to live blamelessly. But here is what I will say because of Zechariah, I will not cease to do what I can to live in

such a way as to challenge all those who would use my faith for their own selfish ends. Will you do that too? I believe that that is the best way to honour the memory of a man like Zechariah.