

Luke 1:57-80
December 19, 2021
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57Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. **58**Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. **59**On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. **60**But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” **61**They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” **62**Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. **63**He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. **64**Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. **65**Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. **66**All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

67Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: **68**“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. **69**He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, **70**as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, **71**that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. **72**Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, **73**the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us **74**that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, **75**in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. **76**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **77**to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. **78**By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, **79**to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” **80**The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

We knew he was coming that day. The doctor had told us that they were going to induce labor and soon our son would be born. We were in Humana Hospital in Dodge City, Kansas, having made the 50 mile drive from our home in Ashland with all that we needed for his birth. We had all our lamaze equipment and books having been through all the classes. We had a Scrabble game to play during those early morning periods between labor pains when of course we needed some distraction. We had everything we needed . . . except a name. That's because we were still debating over names. We knew that this child was a boy so for months we had been debating names for him. I had convinced Erin that his middle name should be David after my best friend and the man who was going to be his godfather. But we couldn't decide on a first name. I like the name Daniel. Not just because I like the character in the Bible, but because I liked all the nicknames that went along with it, Dan, Danny, Danny-Boy. Erin on the other hand liked the name Brandon. Erin's grandfather, Sean O'Sullivan had emigrated to the United States from Ireland in 1910. He had come from a small town in County Kerry at the foot of Mt. Brandon, from a family of fishermen who made their living on Brandon Bay. So Brandon or Daniel? We couldn't decide. So we decided to wait until he was actually born and decide, did he look like a Brandon or like a Daniel. So when he was finally born at 8 am on June 5th of 1987, one of the nurses turned to us and said, “so what is his name?” and Erin tearfully responded, “He doesn't have one yet.” Over the next hour or two we talked about him, did he look like Daniel or like Brandon? What would it mean to his life with the name we picked? Would he treasure his Irish heritage because he bore the name of a place in the old country? Or would he appreciate the Biblical stories of his namesake in the Hebrew Scriptures? Of course we decided on Brandon, and my father picked up on not the Irish heritage but the fact that he had been born in Dodge City and immediately said, “you should have given him the middle name of Iron.” Brandon Iron, Dodge City, cattle country? Oh well. But this morning hearing the story of the naming of John brings back these memories. Looking at a young child and trying to discern what he will be, what she will do with her life. When Elizabeth and Zechariah name him John, in Hebrew *Yohanan*, the gracious gift of God, and not Zechariah after his father, they cut him loose from family ties and the next time we meet John it will be as a wanderer in the wilderness

proclaiming the coming of long-awaited Messiah.

It was about 30 years ago now, because our first two children were still very small and our third child had not yet arrived, but I was at a meeting of Presbyterian ministers and went for a walk during lunch with three or four of my colleagues and as we were walking we spoke of a lot of things but, as fathers do, I said a lot about our children. It was then I realized that although we were all of similar age, I was the only one in the group who had children. That's when one of my friends said, "I don't get it really. Why should we have children? Give me one good reason why we should have kids. Just one." And you know what I said . . . ? Nothing. It was one of those jaw-dropping moments that I stood there with my mouth open and couldn't think of a thing to say. Not because I couldn't think of reasons to have children, but it just seemed so self-evident to me. Why have kids? Because that's what you do? No, it's more than that. Because a baby is, in the best of worlds, evidence that a love affair has taken place.¹ And I guess that is what I wish I had said to my friends, that love overflows, that love can't be contained. Everyone who is married knows this, everyone who has been in love knows this. Because it is never just about the two of you. When you love, it overflows, sometimes into a family, but sometimes into a community, or a church, or neighbors and friends, but love always overflows. Some of you know that I have an older brother, Jeff who with his wife Kim made the decision years ago not to have children themselves. But that doesn't stop them from moving beyond just the two of them and for years Jeff has been a tutor in math to kids who struggle with that subject. He had lots of practice with that, helping me when we were young. Because love overflows.

That's what we celebrate in Advent. That's what Gabriel announced to Zechariah and to Mary, that love overflows. A baby is, in the best of worlds, evidence that a love affair has taken place. That's certainly true of the babies Luke tells us about. If there is anything true we can say about God without being presumptuous, it is that God is love. God didn't need to create us and our world because he was lonely or bored or needed something to do. We are a creation of God's love. God himself is a relationship of love and as such, love overflows and we are the result. And God loves us so much that even when we rebel and run away from him, he never gives up on us, and the baby in the manger, the coming one that John is here to proclaim is the proof. "I love you so much," God says, "that instead of waiting for you to come to me, I will come to you. I will become as you are, I will become one of you, bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, and I will show you that I will love you even to death." And so a baby is born. First to Elizabeth and Zechariah and they look at him as we looked at Brandon and wondered what he would be, and inspired by the Spirit Zechariah sang that he would "guide the people in the way of peace." And he's born to proclaim something about another baby. Born in a stable, in a small town, to a poor carpenter and his bride. And we proclaim that a lot of special things happened that night—angels and shepherds and eventually some strangers from the east—but really the special thing is that God was born as an ordinary infant, because love overflowed. So it is we celebrate the birth of John and we look forward to the birth of Jesus. Because something new is born in us and this is a time when we come here to celebrate all that has been born in us because of this child—the joy, the peace, the faith—or at least the longing for them, and because we believe as best we can that love does overflow—from God, to us, to one another.

Because of Covid exposures we're having to change things this year. We missed out on the children's Christmas program this year and that's too bad because we have lots of great experiences of programs past. Tom Long who was one of my preaching professors back in seminary liked to tell the story about a Christmas pageant at a small church in which the part of the innkeeper at Bethlehem was played by a high school student. He was quiet and polite boy, but the kind of boy for whom the word "awkward"

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Mixed Blessings*. p.49.

was an apt description—awkward in manner, awkward in social relationship, even awkward in size, his growing frame always pushing at the limits of his clothes. His classmates liked him well enough, but he was the sort of person was easy to overlook, to exclude from the center of things. When Joseph and Mary appeared at the inn, he stood . . . awkwardly . . . in the doorway, slumping a bit toward the couple as they made their request for lodging. He then dutifully recited his one line, “Thee is no room in the inn.” But as Mary and Joseph turned and walked wearily away toward the cattle stall where they would spend the night, the boy continued to watch them with eyes filled with eyes filled with compassion. Suddenly responding to a grace which, thought not part of the script, filled the moment, he startled himself, the holy couple, and the audience, by calling, “Wait a minute. Don't go. You can have my room.”²

That kid gets it. It's not in the script, it's not planned. But love makes room, love overflows and something new happens. That's what happens in Advent. That's what happens at Christmas. So for this time at least, let's just remember and revel in the fact that we are loved beyond our wildest dreams, loved just the way we are. In the light of that star beneath which the ordinary becomes holy and the holy ordinary, beneath which it becomes exceedingly clear that there is nothing more we must do or be to be loved by God. For this week at least, let us believe that on this final Sunday of Advent—and on Christmas Day and on every day of our lives—what our true love sends us is his holy self, in flesh just like ours,³ because God is love and love overflows. May our love overflow and make room as well—for one another, our families and friends, to our community, the stranger in our midst, and to our world which sorely needs an overflowing of love and to hear the angel's words all over again, “be not afraid, for there is good news of a great joy . . .”

² Long, Thomas G., *Something is About to Happen*. p. 45.

³ Taylor, p. 52