

John 1:6-28  
Luke 1:5-25  
December 4, 2011

### Ya Know, Christmas is Not Your Birthday

When I was a child, every year around the third or fourth week of December amidst all the holiday happenings and the Christmas preparations, at some point I would find a little space in my heart to feel sorry for my father. My sisters often felt the same thing. You see my father was born on December 24. The third son of four, he was a Christmas Eve baby and it seemed to the three of us, his children, that he was shortchanged a true birthday celebration. We did our best to keep Christmas Eve dinner my father's birthday dinner, but let's face it, we were always rushing out the door for Christmas Eve services and visions of sugarplums danced in our heads. What child can help but to wonder about the stacks of Christmas plunder on December 24? It seemed to me that my father was a rather good sport about it; but I do remember him opening up one year about how as a child; it was a bit difficult. Not that they participated in the Yule Tide carnage which is now our North American ritual of over consumption; for my dad having been born in 1919, grew up in the depression and Christmas and birthdays were on several years -one

small present per person - events. Now that I am on the Adult side of Christmas, I realize that my father actually learned a good lesson early. Ya Know Christmas is Not Your Birthday.

The Gospel of Luke begins the Christmas story with tales of Angels and two birthdays. Luke tells us the story of the birth of Jesus and he tells us the story of the birth of John the Baptist. John is older than Jesus and according to Luke John prepares the way for the ministry of Jesus so John's story comes first. We are reasonably familiar with Mary's tale and the visit of Gabriel but story of John is far less known. John the Baptist is an important figure in the Gospel; but you know John, Christmas is not your birthday.

This might be something that needs further consideration Christmas not our birthdays. Every one of us is aware that Christmas has gotten away from us. Every one of us is aware that we in our culture, teach that the true meaning of Christmas is presents. What's fascinating about our predicament, especially for church going Christians is that we are uncomfortable about our actions. We genuinely soul search on this subject. We make certain vows to be more frugal, a little bit more like John the Baptist and then we go

ahead and stress our hearts, stretch our schedules to the point of exhaustion, spend our wads or run up our debts anyway.

Our culture is a powerful force, it exerts multi levels of pressure on our behavior and by December 22<sup>nd</sup> we are thoroughly convinced that everyone in our family was born on December 25 and many of our friends too. And we say to ourselves oh well, I'll do better next year. But the Gospel of Luke reminds John and it reminds us that Christmas is not our birthday.

As Luke tell's the story of Christmas he points out all kinds of parallels. Like Abraham and Sarah before them Zechariah and Elizabeth are an older couple with strong faith but they are childless. In the minds of ancient Jews, when a couple was childless it was considered the fault of the woman and there was shame. Elizabeth no doubt in some circles was considered a disgrace. How many of us have situations in our family about which we are embarrassed? Sometime at Christmas, family dysfunction is amplified. Zechariah didn't have quite the same pain as Elizabeth, but still there was this empty place in his heart. There would be no son to carry on his name. Zechariah and Elizabeth felt the first century stigma of being childless.

Christmas is not our birthday but think of the cultural pressures we face. Christmas for our nation's businesses is a season of commerce. What we call Advent, they label the Christmas Shopping Season or "Shopmas" and some stores start playing Christmas Music on November 1. In fact the reason they call the Friday after Thanksgiving "Black Friday", is that for many establishments, Black Friday is the day that the bottom line changes from a loss to a gain or from red ink to black. And since businesses don't survive based on their good looks and great nature, turning a profit is a good thing. So they advertise and advertise and by the time I get to the second Sunday in Advent, I am about thoroughly convinced that I should present my wife a diamond necklace from Jared while she drives me around in the new Lexus I bought her. Do people really buy cars for Christmas? Don't answer.

Zechariah was a priest of the order of Abijah, one of 24 divisions of priests, descendants of Moses' Brother Aaron and the Levites, who lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Thousands of them worked the temple in shifts, spending most of their time working their farms in the surrounding countryside. It was honor to be on duty and a rare duty to be the priest tending the incense in the sanctuary, so

just like Mary the mother of Jesus, Zechariah was alone when he experienced the vision of an Angel. He wasn't a young single woman like Mary, but of course he was terrified. To be in the presence of God or God's messenger was knee shaking audacious. The Angel tells both Mary and Zechariah be not afraid. After all these years of praying for a baby, Zechariah cannot fully believe the news of a coming pregnancy and he of course questions the Angel. Mary questions God as well. How can it be that I am pregnant? I'm not even married.

They question God. We question God all the time. It occurs to us that perhaps we shouldn't mark the birth of Christ like it is actually the birthdays of our children and our own. We understand the basic message of the Bible; being a good steward and all, but we shrug it off. We shuff it off every year, even after vowing we will do better and we go nuts at Christmas in so many ways anyways.

The way the story goes the Messenger is not happy with the cheeky priest on incense duty and he steals Zechariah's voice. I am Gabriel because you did not believe my word...you will become mute. Apparently God expects more from a priest than from a teenage woman for he silences Gabriel but calms Mary the Mother of Jesus.

But both future parents are assured that their child will be holy, will bring joy and do great things. Zechariah is shaken and he looks different. When he comes out from the inner sanctuary everyone realizes that he has had a vision and he does not speak again until John is born and he announces John's name. Elizabeth for her part becomes pregnant and spends the first five months of her pregnancy in seclusion. It is interesting that both Elizabeth and Zechariah mark this period of pregnancy with silence.

I happened to be watching MSNBC this Wednesday morning while on the treadmill and President Obama's Aide Valerie Jarrett was on TV essentially cheering people on to shop. The basic message was that Christmas shopping was a patriotic duty (my words) and that if all don't shop this December, our nation may slide back into a recession. Gholly not only do we show our Children that Christmas is their second birthday, but we are told if we don't go overboard with our spending we are going to mess up our painfully slow economic recovery.

So the corporations advertise, the politicians cheer us on, and then there are the interpersonal relationships we all have. We call up our sisters and brother's. "What are you getting Bob for Christmas."

We compare Christmas lists with our friends and the pressure grows. We text our friends on Christmas morning as soon as our parents aren't looking. "I got the Xbox Kinnect. When Christmas is over we compare loot lists. We all belong to the Church of the Holy Consumer and depending on your priestly source, we disciples of mammon are reported to spend between 460 and 480 Billion Dollars a year on Christmas; now that's "a chunk a change."

Because, its not my birthday or your birthday or your kids birthday. Because Jesus lived a life of healing the sick, helping the poor and empowering the weak and oppressed, The people in the Advent Conspiracy want us all to take one or two or three or ten percent of that spending and re-allocate it to charitable giving for clean water around the world. If you don't know what I am talking about visit [AdventConspiracy.org](http://AdventConspiracy.org). We Presbyterians propose other options in our Christmas Joy Offering. Would you be offended if I pointed out in a counter cultural claim that it would actually be unfaithful for any of us to skip the Christmas Joy Offering or Holiday Sharing or Hieffer?

Although I read this story of John's birth every year during Advent, I have never preached on it before and it occurred to me this

week as I studied, that the text it invites us into silence and/or reflection. Goodness knows December is not known for its low key laid back pace. Most of us try to double in half the time. Maybe Gabriel wasn't so much punishing Zechariah as he was giving him the chance to think deeply about how he was going to raise this child who even in the womb is filled with the Holy Spirit. We too are invited to ponder the deeper meanings of the season. There still are some Advent devotions booklets in the lobby. Maybe we are being invited to greater periods of personal prayer.

One of the Lessons that John The Baptist and his followers seemingly had to learn was that Christmas was not John's Birthday. John was not the Christ, not the savior, not the Son. Its not likely that Zechariah and Elizabeth were alive when their son was killed by Herod; ( because they were so advanced in years when he was born) but if they were alive they would have had to settle for their son being number two. It's not that God is calling us to cancel Christmas, It that God is looking for some rearranging.

One Minister writes.... "I have a friend who says that Advent is his favorite season. Why? I think because Advent is a time of exquisite balance between the sadness of the mess we live in, and

the bliss of the world we would like to live in. Advent is when we acknowledge that bliss is not the blotting out of pain with port and plum pudding, but a process, a pilgrimage, a pregnancy (or two) amidst the chaos of the world's governing a cry for the coming reign of God.”<sup>1</sup>

I am wondering how hard it would be for us this Advent Christmas Season, pretty hard I think, to put ourselves third, our loved ones second and to put Jesus first. We are not the Christ, Not the Son, not the Savior. I know we all struggle with this Christmas thing. Christmas is not our birthday. I know we pray about it. How hard it is to put Jesus first.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Opening the Scripture: Faith through the Year*, London: Continuum, 2000, p49.