

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**Second Sunday of Advent – December 10, 2017**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Luke 1:5-25**

**FOR REFLECTION**

**“When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.**

- Jimi Hendrix, Musician (1942-1970)

**Peace: Elizabeth**

Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first known high priest and his descendants were designated the Kohanim – the priestly class – in charge of certain priestly duties.

Elizabeth was descended from Aaron. Her name, *Elisheba* in Hebrew, meant “oath of G-d.”

King David divided the priesthood into twenty-four orders (1Chr. 24:10) – one of which was the order of Abijah – from which Zechariah was descended. Zechariah (*Zekharyah*) meant “YHWH remembers.”

And John’s name, *Yochanan* in Hebrew, meant “YHWH is gracious.” So what Luke is saying is that John (the Baptist), son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, had no chance at a secular life. He was a PK down to his DNA.

Another thing to note here is that, in that time and culture, childlessness brought shame and disgrace to a family. (Notice also that the lack of a child is blamed on Elizabeth’s “barrenness,” not on Zechariah’s sperm count.) The desire for a child was not necessarily the desire to nurture and raise a human into adulthood. It was to prove one’s worthiness to the neighbors. You may remember Hannah dropped her son off at the temple as soon as he was weaned and ready to roll – dedicated to the priesthood. John apparently came to his prophetic vocation later – in the wilderness, baptizing and calling people to repentance. Being the only child of older parents can mess you up – or drive you into the arms of G-d. I’m hoping the latter for Peter.

But if we look back at Elizabeth – an older woman of her time and culture – we can imagine the relief, the joy, the peace of mind that came with her ability to carry and deliver a child – and get the neighbors and her (probably) self-righteous extended family off her back. In some ways, it was equal to being exonerated for a crime everyone thought you committed. Even though this couple was “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord...” people of their time believed that so-called barrenness was a punishment from G-d for shortcomings or private trespasses. A child was a declaration of innocence and good character, a ticket to social acceptance.

It is interesting how much of this ancient belief system still exists in our society to this day. If a woman is unable to give birth to a child, she is considered flawed – and she often blames herself – as well as blaming G-d for punishing her for crimes known or unknown. People still expect women to marry and have children as a matter of course. If a woman chooses not to have children and live her life dedicated to a profession or travel or the arts – people think there is something wrong with her. They feel they have to justify their existence as a non-procreator – even now in 2017.

So, yes, one can see how Elizabeth could be a symbol of peace – peace of mind, peace of heart, peace with G-d and neighbor.

But we also need to remember that this story was told to set a context for the child, John – to explain his relationship to Jesus and the ministry he engaged in that set the scene for his cousin's work. There were things going on in that world – in the days of King Herod of Judea – under the Roman occupation – under the strict purity laws of the Jewish hierarchy – in the general population that had become angry with G-d and king. The need for peace of mind and peace in the streets was great.

As the text points out, the people were in the streets. This is not something I have ever noticed just reading the text. But the Rev. Dr. Wm J. Barber II, pastor of Greenleaf Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church in NC and architect of the Moral Mondays Movement, recently spoke at a conference here in Los Angeles designed by the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

The conference was entitled “Bridging the Divide: Religion, Race and Politics” and Dr. Barber pointed out to the interfaith gathering that, at the time that John the Baptist and Jesus were getting themselves born, the people were in the streets.

Luke 1:8 Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. **10 Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.**

There was something going on – the people were not quietly assembled in their places of worship piously asking favors of G-d. They were outside, in the street – in public prayer. You may have seen snippets in the news lately – things like 12 Christians arrested last week reading 2000 verses of scripture about G-d's preferential concern for the poor – and praying in the senate office building calling on senators to oppose the GOP tax bill. There have been clergy protests against the GOP healthcare bill. These are the ways in which Dr. Barber brings his faith to the streets.

As Reverend Dr. William Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP and voice of the Forward Together movement, calls it a “deeply constitutional, deeply moral” battle against the worst forms of injustice, led by young people, minorities, and people of multiple faiths - the exact groups the current political regime is working to disenfranchise.

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/reverend-william-barber-l\\_b\\_6706680.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/reverend-william-barber-l_b_6706680.html)

Members of the [Moral Mondays] protest movement meet Mondays to protest an action by the North Carolina legislature and then enter the legislature building. Once they enter, a number are peacefully arrested each Monday.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral\\_Mondays](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_Mondays)

Peaceful protest against deep injustice as an expression of faith is an ancient tool of social change. This is what the people were probably engaged in when Zechariah was engaged in priestly duties – and begging G-d for a child. And the child that was sent through Elizabeth was John the Baptist, a prophetic voice who engaged in peaceful, public, social protest – preparing the way for his cousin’s prophetic ministry.

This brings new light to Elizabeth as a symbol of peace – mother of a prophet who called for personal and social repentance – who used peaceful protest to fight injustice.

The birth of this child not only brought redemption to Elizabeth in her community – it brought to life a peace and justice movement that continues today.

G-d remembers, G-d is gracious, G-d is with us – here and in the streets.

## Luke 1:5-25

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. **10 Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.** 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' 18 Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' 19 The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. **She said, 25 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'**