

Laying the Foundation

Who laid the foundation of faith for you? For me it was really three people. The first was my Aunt Ethel who was the matriarch of my mom's family. She took my mom in when their parents were unable to care for her and raised her as her own. Auntie Ethel was a very pious person who attended the Baptist church every time the doors were open. She and my Auntie Alice attended the same Baptist church for years.

My family did not attend church, but if you spent the night with Auntie Ethel or Auntie Alice on the weekend, you went to church. If you went to their house for dinner on a Wednesday, you went to church. It was that experience that taught me that God loved me. It was that experience where I first encountered what it meant to be a part of the community of faith.

It was also there that I learned what I thought was the right way to pray with your hands touching your face, at least that is what my two aunties did.

The second person who helped lay the foundation for my faith was a pastor when I was a teenager. His name was Rev. Patterson, but everyone called him Rev. Pat or just Pat. Rev. Pat loved being with the youth of the church and it was there that I learned what it meant to be a pastor for all people. Rev. Pat was also very much involved in the community and people all knew him by name. I even made a Rev. Pat puppet in my art class. I believe I follow his lead in my ministry.

The third person who helped lay the foundation of faith for me was Barb Cossa. She was a friend from the Berkley UMC church where Rev. Pat was, but had left to attend a Church of God Church in Royal Oak. During the early 80s I had left the church and was bitter about the whole thing. It was Barb who never lost faith in me and it was Barb who dragged me back to church, and it was in her church, that I answered my call into ordained ministry.

In my foundation of faith, there is a Baptist, a United Methodist and a Word of God church member. Who laid the foundation of faith for you? Think about that person or persons for a moment. What was it about them that led you to the faith you have right now? Were there specific acts that built that foundation or was it simply who they were?

Today we are looking at what is called the Canticle of Zechariah. Let me give you some background of Zechariah and how he fits into our Christmas story.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are an older couple who have never been able to have any children and are now past the point where that was likely. In those times and in Old Testament times, too, for a wife not to bear children would not only have been something the couple would mourn, but something for which the woman would experience shame.

It's something a husband could even choose to divorce a wife over. On top of that, children were believed to be a sign of God's blessing and not having children was considered a sign of God's disapproval, so couples who didn't have any children were sometimes looked on as being judged by God perhaps for something they had done.

Probably for 20 years or more, Zechariah and Elizabeth would have been walking the road of childlessness and experiencing the full spectrum of emotions that went along with that, probably over and over again. Watching their peers become pregnant and raise their families, aching for a child of their

own, mourning that loss, maybe at times blaming one another, all the while experiencing deep shame, judgment from their neighbors, wondering what they had done, that God would withhold this from them.

I wonder if Zechariah being a priest felt an extra measure of shame, always wondering whether he was respected as a leader in the temple because of this perceived sign on God's judgment on him. Maybe Zechariah was angry at God, maybe he had closed the door of his heart to trust in God or to any expectation for God's action as the years continued to pass?

That's kind of the impression that I get of Zechariah when he's chosen to perform duties in the temple. He's to offer incense to God in the Holy Place in the temple. This is something that probably would have only happened once in a lifetime for a priest. The temple is the place where Jews believed that God dwelled, where God's presence was.

I wonder if Zechariah came that day with a sense of expectation that he would meet with God, with an open heart, and an sense of anticipation. Or maybe he came expecting nothing, believing that God had long ago turned his face away from him, never having seen any sign of God showing him favor or fulfilling the promises he made to him or to the nation of Israel?

This was a time when there had not been any prophesy for a long time. It was a time where God had appeared to be silent. Israel had been waiting for hundreds and hundreds of years for God to speak to them, all the while watching the Romans come and take possession of their land. They had been waiting hundreds of years for God to answer their question, recorded in the book of Malachi, "Where is the God of justice?" and for God to fulfill the promise made through the prophet Malachi, "See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then, suddenly, the one you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire will come."

That sure sounds to me like God is laying a foundation of faith for God's people.

So when Zechariah came to the temple, the angel Gabriel comes to him and tells him that a prayer he had perhaps stopped praying years ago has been heard. Elizabeth will give birth to a son. He will give them both joy and delight. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

But Zechariah doubts the message, so God makes it so he cannot speak for 9 months. Nine long months of silence. But when the silence is broken, Zechariah sings out. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and sings about how God has given him back the knowledge that God keeps promises. He sings about how God empowers God's people to serve without fear.

And he sings about his new son, John, the son he had long given up hope for, and how God will use his son John to tell others of God's salvation and prepare the way for his coming. Lay the foundation for the one who is to come, Jesus the Christ.

Zechariah sings about God's tender mercy that rises like the sun and shines on those living in the darkness to guide their feet into the path of peace.

Let's look at our art for today, on the front of your bulletin or on the screen. It is entitled Berakah, (which means a Jewish prayer of blessing expressing gratitude and praise to God" by Hannah Garrity. She says, "In this image Zechariah holds his baby boy. He speaks a blessing, a berakah. For his neighbors, he answers the question, "What then will this child become?"

The intimate love of a father with his newborn son is captured in this pose. Patterns of water pour over John's little shirt. Zechariah sees what his son will become and begins to speak his future into being from the start. As dawn breaks over Zechariah's shoulder, his prophecy foretells God coming into the world – of light dawning in weary spaces.

Zechariah relents. God has made Her statement. He could not speak until he de-centered himself from the story. He gives the name that Elizabeth has been called to give. Zechariah's willingness to hear the call is the action in this moment. Traditionally, he would give his first born son his own name.

His neighbors are shocked by the name he chooses to give, by the prophecy, by his being able to speak again. By removing his own personal and family legacy from the picture, he is truly able to give way to the greater narrative that God is coming him to participate in.

This is an incredible moment of humility. As I created this image, I asked God's help in identifying where I can step out of the way to forward Her vision for this weary world. God knows. Her work is greater than my legacy.

How are you laying a foundation for other people? In what ways are you practicing surrender to fully participate in the greater work God is calling you into?

In our scripture for today, John's future work is foretold. We imagine John sharing with the people the good news of God, of forgiveness. We can feel the warmth of the rising, heavenly sun which, through mercy, shines light and paves a path of peace. John's entire purpose of preparation, of laying the foundation looks like living out the gospel and culminated in a trail leading to peace.

Listen to this poem from Rev. Sarah Speed called Words for the Beginning.

If I could give you words
for the very beginning –
for the stretches
and the yawns,
and the opening of eyes,
for the first hiccups,
and the first smiles,
and the first purse of your lips,
I would say,
“Oh, dear child, how you are loved.”

But the thing about love
is you can't stop there,
so I would go on to say,
“You are strong,
stronger than you think,
and you are not alone –
look at these parents who adore you,
and these doctors, and nurses fighting for you.
And you are enough, already enough.

You haven't done anything yet.
You've just been here,

breathing,
sleeping,
and already you are enough.
And then I might say,
“This world is a mess,
but it is your home and you can make it better,
so always try to make it better.

And maybe most important of all
there is love
that is bigger than my understanding,
that moves through this world,
and I call that love God.
and that love is here,
here in this room,
and that love knows your name by heart.”

Those are the words I would say to you
as you stretch and yawn and open your eyes
on the very first morning
of your very first day.
Let that be your foundation,
like Zechariah did for John.
Let love be your beginning.

Maybe our expectancy this Advent should be accompanied by a consideration of our role as we prepare the way for God’s great acts in our world. Just as John’s birth represented, we, the church, are called to pick up our tools and pave a path of peace. We, too are an important part of the story of God saving the world. God’s redemption of the world includes prophets who go before and pave the way.

Who are you laying the foundation for? Who will you be the light for? Zechariah spoke, knowing his son would become the “prophet of the most high”. Zechariah spoke words of vision to a newborn that grew strong in spirit and helped lay the foundation into the way of peace.

As we go forth, let us remember there is power in the words that we speak, to anyone, but especially to our young ones as we lay the foundation for their spiritual homes. Amen.