

Uncle Zechariah

[Luke 1:5-24; 1:57-66](#)

A Christmas Family Portrait

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At wedding receptions I often find myself sitting with total strangers, and when they realize I'm the one who tied the knot earlier in the evening, the conversation shuts down for a moment. Well, you know how it is: we clergy are thought to be a breed apart, not divine certainly, but not quite human either, and some don't know how to behave around us. But then someone breaks the ice. They remember Uncle Horace who used to be a Methodist minister back in Cedar Rapids, or was it Des Moines, and did I know him by any chance?

I don't know their Uncle Horace, but I do know a bit about an uncle of Jesus named Zechariah. Zechariah represents those of us whose dreams are never quite fulfilled. For one thing, Zechariah, like many of us, was a minor character in a cast of thousands. He lived in a town so remote that Luke doesn't even bother to identify it except to say that it was in the hill country of Judea. That's a polite way of saying that Zechariah ministered among hillbillies, in a synagogue of no reputation. Oh, there used to be inquiries from larger, more prominent pulpits, but Zechariah was getting on in years, and every one knows that few if any invitations come after we turn 55.

Does any of this sound familiar? You came out of college full of ambition. In those heady, exciting days your motto was "Watch out world, here I come." But the world turned a blind eye. The world gave you the cold shoulder. The world promoted persons not half as talented as you are, and now, like Zechariah, you are getting on in years, and the windows of opportunity, once so bright and beckoning, are shut and frosted over.

One of my unfulfilled ambitions crops up once in awhile in my dreams. My subconscious is still wrestling with a long-standing desire to be the pastor of a particular church. Several leaders in that church told me that when their pastor moved on they would come looking for me, and I believed them. I fanned the embers of that hope for several years until the pastor left . . . and no one dialed my number. Years later when the next pastor retired I sent them my resume. They replied a polite note to the effect that they would be looking for someone younger. In my dreams I still walk the streets of that city, but though I can see the tall steeple in the distance, I can't get there. The streets are either blocked or they are posted with one-way signs pointing in the opposite direction.

What do you do when you can't get there? It's easy to daydream over lost opportunities, isn't it? Or to blame the company for not recognizing your true worth. Or to play the "If only" game: if only I had gone on for a graduate degree; if only I hadn't married so young; if only I had worked nights and weekends. But "if only" beckons to the past and blinds us to the future. "If only" robs us of the permission we need to get up and try again. If we spend the rest of our lives gazing at the tombstone of our buried dreams we will never see that life keeps rising from the grave, that prayers are answered every day, that angels show up at the right side of the kitchen table, and on the other side of the desk, and out on the sidewalk somewhere between here and there.

In George Bernard Shaw's play "St. Joan," Joan hears voices from God. This upsets the king. "Oh, your voices, your voices," he says, "Why don't your voices come to me? I am the king not you." "They do come," Joan replies, "but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it, but if you prayed from your heart and listened to the thrilling of the bells in the air after they stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

Frankly, I'm as mystified as the king over Joan's voices. Were they objectively spoken or only subjectively heard? I don't know. But perhaps a more important question is, are we open to God however God may

choose to communicate with us? What I love about Zechariah is that he was in church waiting on God when the angel appeared. Even if he wasn't a headliner, even if he wasn't chosen to be a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, let alone to wear the mantle of the High Priest, he gained a reputation for being, as the text puts it, "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." And when one has been passed over repeatedly, when the embers of ambition have grown cold, when we must admit that we will not fulfill our dearest dreams, it is no small achievement to keep on keeping on. In fact if we had more Zechariahs in today's pulpits, we ministers would not be rated just ahead of used car salesmen in the Gallup Poll of most admired professions.

Zechariah was a good man, a firm believer in God, and a competent priest. So it may come as something of a surprise that he showed so little faith when "an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him." Well, wouldn't you be terrified? It's one thing to believe in God, but does anyone ever expect to meet God face to face? Or even one of God's angels?

A little later we learn that childless Zechariah has been praying for a family, but when the angel informs him that God has answered his prayers he can't believe that either: "How will I know that this is so?" he asks, "for I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years." Sounds like a reasonable question, doesn't it? But the angel hears something in his tone of voice that betrays it as unbelief: "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."

Personally, I'm grateful that Luke chose to launch his Gospel with the story of this unbelieving believer. I'm grateful because that's who I am a good deal of the time. At one level I am a staunch believer. I grew up in the church, quoting the Lord's Prayer as readily as the Pledge of Allegiance. Abraham and Moses were more vivid to me than Washington and Lincoln. By the time I was ten I could find my way through the Bible more easily than the dictionary. And here I am, an ordained minister of the Word and Sacrament, but if a messenger of God suddenly appeared at the right side of that communion table, I guarantee I would be terrified, gripped with fear. So, like Uncle Zechariah, I am at times an unbelieving believer.

But here is the good news: God did not give up on Zechariah. For when his term of service in the Temple ended he went home and, within a year, Elizabeth gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. Skeptical, doubtful, so argumentative that God had to silence him for nine months, that was Zechariah. Yet God did not disown him or bypass him, but stuck with him, and it was Zechariah who fathered the boy who would grow up to be John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah.

Some of you can believe that God spoke to Zechariah centuries ago but you aren't expecting to hear from God anytime soon. You really do believe that God rescued the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt but you don't expect God to liberate you from the shackles of alcohol, or gambling, or sexual deviance. You know Jesus shared his last supper with twelve men who never quite measured up spiritually, men who misunderstood Jesus and ran away in his hour of greatest need, but it's hard to believe he would invite you to be a guest at his table here today.

Well then, get out the Christmas family album and take a long look at Uncle Zechariah. If anyone should have believed, it was he, but he didn't. If anyone should have been disqualified from God's service, it was he, but he wasn't. And if anyone doesn't deserve to sit at this table, it is I, but by God's grace I may, and so may you. For the God who addressed unbelieving Zechariah at the right side of that ancient altar addresses us today from this table, and his salutation has not changed: "Do not be afraid!"

You are welcome at the Lord's Table, not because you are so good, but because God is so good, and because God very much wants to paste your portrait alongside Zechariah's in heaven's family album.