

By the Tender Mercy of Our God

There are two things that come to mind when I consider the Canticle of Zechariah. The first is to note *why* Zechariah's lips were sealed. The angel Gabriel brought a promise from God, and Zechariah questioned whether it was possible. Why the presence of an angel was believable but birth in old age was not, I don't know. But anyhow, Zechariah was struck mute and he couldn't say a thing until he named his son John and then he burst into song.

The second thing I notice is when his tongue was finally released, *what* he said. "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

I wonder if maybe we might need to hear these words particularly now. There seems to be a lot of *fear* in the world - which of course was true of Zechariah's world as well - and it seems that what is being said is often neither helpful nor useful.

It takes courage to open one's mouth, even with a good word. It really takes courage when what is to be said might cause dyspepsia at the Christmas dinner table.

But God does not call us to fear. God calls us to courage - courage in the knowledge of promises of God.

You see, to know the heart of God is to know how God relates to what God has made.

The story of the Bible as it unfolds is the story of God's tender mercy to what God has made.

After the flood, God made a covenant never to despair of humanity to the point of wiping the slate clean again. Twentieth century theologian Karl Barth says that this is *the* defining moment when God decided to be, forevermore, irrevocably, on the side of humanity.

In order to live into the fullness of this promise, God called one family - Abraham and Sarah - to a new way of life, a way of life of following God and making God's nature known to all they encountered.

You could say the Bible is the story of how God keeps promises. Genesis is the story of keeping of that particular promise.

And then God made another promise - when the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were enslaved under the heels of the Egyptians - God decided to save them. God called Moses, and Moses (after some fits and starts - a lesson to us all) led God's people with his sister and brother into the freedom of the Promised Land. And along the way, God made another promise, *to be the God of this whole people*. We see this covenant in the Ten Commandments. Exodus through Deuteronomy are the stories of God keeping that promise. Over and over again, God makes

promises. The stories of those promise are called the Torah, though the word doesn't adequately translate into English because we call it the "Law". That's not really an adequate description because the story of God's engagement with God's people is much more than rules. The Torah has *two* dimensions: salvation and obligation, story and stipulation.¹

Later as the rabbis considered these dimensions of faithfulness to the law, they came up with two words in the Talmud that characterize this faithfulness: *haggada* and *halaka*.

Haggada is the obligation to tell the story. *Halaka* is the obligation to go in the way of God.²

The whole bible is the story of the tender mercy of our God, working from promise to promise until with the coming of Jesus Christ, we are grafted *into* the promises of God.

And just like the ancient Hebrews, our right response is to *tell* and to *go*.

Paul gets that when he writes to the Philippians: "this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Haggada and *halaka*... telling the story and going and going in the way of God.

Speaking truth can be terrifying. Speaking truth can have consequences.

Listen to this story that Brian Blount shares about the consequences of faithfulness as he tells the story of would-be slave preacher James Smith: "He was finally received into the church and baptized. Not long after this, he felt loudly called upon to go out and labor for the salvation of souls among the slave population with whom he was identified. At this conduct his master was much displeased, and strove to prevent him from the exercise of what the slave considered to be his duty to God and his brethren, on the Sabbath day. He was sometimes kept tied all day Sundays while the other slaves were allowed to go just where they pleased on that day. At other times he was flogged until his blood would drip down at his feet, and yet he would not give up laboring whenever he could get an opportunity, on the Sabbath day, for the conversion of souls. God was pleased to bless his labors and many were led to embrace the Saviour under his preaching.

At length his master sold him to a slave trader, who separated him from his family and carried him to the State of Georgia. His parting words to his wife were that if they proved faithful to God, He would bring them together again in a more free land than Virginia."³

The hoped-for reunion did occur in Canada seventeen years later.

Speaking truth can have consequences.

Haggada and *halaka*: Telling the story, and going in the way of God.

¹ Bernhard Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament 4th edition. (Prentice-Hall, Englewood, 1986) p534

² Ibid.

³ John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 276-77.

Those two words comprise the heart of our common life together. Indeed, they are the heart of our *sacramental* common life together as we are reminded of God's promises.

Our common life together is, at its heart, the trust that God will be God, and that God will be God *for* us. It is the belief that God will keep God's promises.

A number of years ago, I was walking into a Presbytery committee meeting, and I'll readily admit I was not in a great mood. I am a deep believer in the principle of Presbytery, but this was a business meeting, and I expected it to have all of the spiritual vitality of a business meeting. Which is to say, I didn't come in with any great expectation that I would encounter examples of moral courage.

So as our committee met, we had with us a pastor from Cuba who came bringing us greetings on behalf of the Presbyterian Church there. He shared that he is the pastor of three churches and two missions. Sundays, he said, are an exercise in mobility, beginning with breakfast with one church, lunch with the next, and dinner in the third. In fact, he went on, most of his life is an exercise in mobility between the churches and the missions, and he concluded by saying, "Before, our countries were not friendly, but now they are friendly and I can be with you, and I ask for your prayers. There are many changes going on, so many changes. We don't know what is going to happen next, our economy is bad, and so now that I am with you, I tell you my story. I ask for your prayers."

Haggada and halaka... telling the story, and going in the way of God.

Another time, when I was living in Georgia, a pastor friend of mine said, "Surely you've seen all of the press coverage on refugees; it's pretty much impossible to miss, and I'm sure you all remember that we are right around the corner from the most diverse square mile in the United States – because Clarkston, Georgia, is where a great number of refugees from all over the world come to settle because they can get jobs at the chicken processing plant. But," she went on, "What you may *not* know is that the Presbyterian Church had wonderful, effective missionaries years ago in Burma, which is now Myanmar."

She went on, "And so, when the refugees come from Burma, they get off the bus, and see the Presbyterian Church in Clarkston, and they say, 'Oh! Presbyterians! It is so good to see some family!'"

That is perhaps as clear a sign of a common life together as I can imagine.

Haggada and Halaka – telling the story and going in the way of God.

God is calling you to courage, and God is calling me to courage, but let's be clear about this: God is not calling us to live each other's calling – God is calling us to bear with one another and to see our life together as a sign of God's faithfulness to God's promises.

God is probably not calling you to be a pastor in Cuba. But God *does* call you to bear with that pastor.

I truly, deeply hope that none of us will ever be refugees, but God *does* call us to bear with refugees.

I will never know that it is to be a slave preacher, but God *is* calling me to bear witness to *that* preacher's calling and his faithfulness to remembering God's promises.

Friends, I can think of no more certain way to be miserable than to seek to live someone else's calling. But our common life together requires that each of us be *faithful* to our own. Living your own calling, living courageously into the fullness of what God has called *you* to do and be, that is how we will find that place where, in the words of Frederick Buechner, "the world's deep hunger and your deep gladness meet."

Anne Lamott tells the story of setting up a Sunday School class in her church for the benefit of the one child who needed it, her son. She begins her story, "I did not mean to help start a Sunday School, and did not have a speck of confidence that I could do so. I have only mediocre self-esteem when I am doing things that I am good at or that don't require any self-esteem. I grow anxious on my way to the dump with a carful of garbage, convinced that my garbage and I will be rejected, either because I am throwing out perfectly good stuff, or because it is so disgusting that the people who run a dump wouldn't want it." That's a special variety of insecurity.

She then tells the story of the progression of her journey – and friends, if you have ever been involved in creating a new program for a church, you could write this story – you could write of the anxieties of not thinking you *knew* enough. You could write of the frustrations of volunteers that didn't emerge or goldfish that ran out, or crises of confidence that leave you wondering if everybody questioned your competence.

New programs are not for the faint of heart.

But when she had chronicled her journey and the successes and failures along the way, she ended with this story that captures the heart of what we share with the whole world through our sacramental life together as we bear witness to the promises of God, when she tells the story of a day at the beach for her Sunday School.

"The kids went in. They yelped as the cold water covered them, and they splashed and screamed and shoved one another a little more roughly than they had in my dream of this day. Still, as I watched them being cuffed by the breaking waves, submerged, missing for a moment, then reappearing, spluttering, laughing, I thought of what this dream had taken: all those times we teachers had had to ask for help, and had plugged away without nearly enough resources, without knowing how, or whether, we were going to manage. And it had taken much more letting go and trusting than we had felt capable of. I remember getting knocked around in these waves when I was young, and how it felt when grown-ups picked you up and tossed you into the air or the water, exciting and scary all at once, and you knew you would always be caught."⁴

The place that God calls you is where your deep gladness, and the world's deep hunger meet. So, by the tender mercy of God, may our lips opened, so that we can tell the story. And may we go in the way that God has called us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁴ Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead, 2005) pp77-78