

“What will this child become?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
December 5, 2021

Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 1:57-60, 67-79

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In a conversation shared on Facebook, a mom picked up her eight-year-old daughter from school and asked her, “How was your day?” After a long pause, her daughter replied, “I just worry they are doing it wrong.” Puzzled, her mom asked, “Doing what wrong?” The daughter answered, “They separate everything so we can’t understand anything. Who says music isn’t really math, or math isn’t science really? Someone made categories but the world is mushier than that.”

Out of the mouth of babes, right? The world *is* mushier than that! Language, science, the arts, philosophy, politics, religion, race and gender, they’re all interconnected.

But we don’t like mushy. So we tend, as one precocious eight year old put it, to make categories. We separate.

Zechariah did it. Zechariah’s a priest, a pastor, and a good one at that. He is entrusted with the holy task of entering the inner sanctuary of the temple, offering incense and praying on behalf of the people in the presence of the Lord. And he is happy to do so. But when an angel shows up and tells him that he and his wife Elizabeth are going to have a son, Zechariah gets mad. He says, *No way*. Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. All their lives they’ve struggled with infertility. After years of watching others have children and grandchildren, Zechariah has long given up on God’s power in his personal life. Oh, he can feel it just fine in the temple, but that faith doesn’t come home with him. He has separated his identity as husband and parent from his identity as priest.

We do this too. We schedule our days into categories. This moment is church and God. This moment is family. This moment is work. This moment is vacation. This moment is stress and freaking out. We put God in a box, so God doesn’t affect all these other parts of our lives. We think God is just this one thing—church.

Yet, long ago, as Zechariah knelt alone and scared on the cold floor of the temple, his frail paper-thin hands shaking, a Christmas angel came bursting into Zechariah’s life to tell him that God is so much more. God isn’t just this temple or this incense or the people praying outside. God is this child about to be born to you. God is the friends who will wait with you. God is Elizabeth who has walked this journey with you.

“What will this child become?” the people ask when they hear of John’s birth. John, the angel says, will turn many people to God. He will be a sign, his name meaning, “God’s gift.”

Zechariah will learn as much about God’s grace from this child cradled in his arms as he will from reading Scripture or worshiping on the Sabbath.

“What then will this child become?” Zechariah answers, “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... to give light to those who sit in darkness.”

Why? How? Because God is present with this child. The Holy Spirit, the expansive presence of God, is everywhere in this story. It is there in the birth of John and Jesus. Zechariah is said to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit.

1 John 3:24: “And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us.”

Over and over again, the Scriptures tell us that God is met, not just in the temple, but in people, in relationships, in family, in friends, in coworkers, in any place or time where there is love. Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” (Matt. 18:20). Not some times. Not church times. All times.

That’s why we’re doing this Advent sermon series, looking for God in the normal, daily stuff of life, the stuff that doesn’t get labeled “religious.” For a year, we’ve been talking with church members as part of our Holy Conversations strategic visioning. We’ve been asking people about where they experience joy and purposefulness. One of the first answers many people gave was relationships: family, friends. But we noticed something else: many didn’t think of relationships as God time; it was relationship time. Categories!

The story of Christmas, however, is, in the words of one eight year old, “the world’s mushier than that.” God may already be in your life, in places you don’t realize. No one, after all, expected God to be born in a barn. No one expected divinity and humanity—those two most irreconcilable categories—to be merged all mushy-like in Christ. Maybe that joy you feel when you’re with people, that love, that’s God. That’s God being born.

When you held your child for the first time—that was God. When you were with your friends, laughing without a care, or when one of them sat up with you all night, holding you as you cried—that was God. When you were kissed, when you danced, when you played as a team, when a colleague inspired you, when you tasted food someone cooked for you—that was God. When a person did a kindness for you, or you helped someone—that was God.

They are all God.

But here’s where some people go wrong. They think, “Right! Relationships are spiritual. I don’t need to worship or belong to a church. I’m with God wherever I am.” But that’s like saying that because science and math are connected, I can do science without math. Good luck! When everything’s interconnected, you need everything.

Remember that, even as the angel directed Zechariah to encounter God in his son, the angel’s message came to Zechariah in the temple. It was in the temple where he learned how to see God in his son.

We need church *and* relationships to help each become the best they can be.

Relationships are what make this church. Church isn't just programs or budgets or education. Church is friendship, love, promises. This is family. We take care of each other here. Our most intimate relationships inform us of what it means to be in relationship with God. And they challenge us to take that love and make it real, here, between us.

Church, in turn, can inspire how we live out our relationships. Here, we learn how to love unconditionally, to listen, to be truthful, to be committed, to pray and wonder together, to form relationships not just with people who are like us but with all kinds of people, even and especially the ones who challenge us and make us grow. Here, we learn what it means for our relationships to be grounded in God's eternal love. Human expressions of love may waver, even break, but God's love does not. Church is where we learn the stories of that holy love.

And when we combine them, when we tear down these artificial walls between church and relationships, we become the biblical vision of an active community of disciples who seek and see God in everything we do. We become the church God wants us to be. We become the friend God wants us to be—the spouse, the parent, the child, the colleague, the neighbor, God wants us to be.

Zechariah tells us that a light will shine this Christmas and make us see. See God.

Some months ago, around when Emerson turned three, he, Jenna, and I sat here in this church with a member who had been through loss and trauma few of us can imagine. I had sat privately with her many times, and I knew that God felt very distant and hard to see. She had kindly offered to help us with our adoption video. Afterward, as we were sitting together, Emerson looked around the church and asked, "Where is God?" We turned the question back to him: "I don't know, Emerson. Where is God?" He thought for a moment, and then he gave us this big smile and pointed at the member sitting in the chair, surrounded by all her hurt, and he said, "That's God."

Yes, Emerson, that's God.

William Blake once wrote, "I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God, but my God eluded me. I sought my neighbor, and found all three: My God, my soul, and thee."

What will this child become? What this relationship, this family, this friend, this church, this love?

A sign. A sign of God being born. **Amen.**