

Sermon 12/15/24: Luke 1:57–66

Advent III

Part of “A Weary World Rejoices” Sanctified Art series

“We Allow Ourselves to Be Amazed”

*<sup>57</sup> When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. <sup>59</sup> On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father’s name. <sup>60</sup> But his mother replied, “No, his name will be John.”*

*<sup>61</sup> They said to her, “None of your relatives have that name.” <sup>62</sup> Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.*

*<sup>63</sup> After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, “His name is John.” <sup>64</sup> At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.*

*<sup>65</sup> All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. <sup>66</sup> All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, “What then will this child be?” Indeed, the Lord’s power was with him. (CEB)*

In the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons, there are several types of characters you can be; one of them is a cleric, which doesn’t mean clergy but is, according to the 5<sup>th</sup> edition Players’ Guide, a “holy warrior powered by divine magic.”<sup>1</sup> Clerics use that magic to accomplish things, roughly like warriors use swords—they’re tools of the trade. The magic shows up in certain kinds of spells, and yes you are getting your nerd quotient in this sermon today, so hold tight if this isn’t your thing, I promise there’s a purpose.

One of the spells a cleric can cast is called *thaumaturgy*, in which the player can “manifest a minor wonder” within the range of its casting, somewhat like an annoying but harmless poltergeist.<sup>2</sup> Examples include changing a fire’s color for a minute, or making your voice up to three times louder, or causing an unlocked door to slam shut. They’re small, short-term bits of the supernatural, deeply minor miracles.

Telling you this is partly so as to hit bingo in geek homiletics by mentioning Star Trek, Star Wars, Dungeons and Dragons, and video games in various sermons,

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<sup>1</sup> [The Cleric: DnD 5e Class Guide | D&D Rules](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Thaumaturgy - DND 5th Edition](#)

but it's also because the name of the spell matters as we continue our series on the weary world rejoicing: thaumaturgy comes from *thaumazo*, [*thau-MAH-tso*] to marvel, wonder, or be amazed.<sup>3</sup> Thaumaturgy is, roughly translated, the “work of wonder.”

“All their neighbors were filled with awe,” says Luke of the birth and naming of John, later the Baptist. It is a large work of wonder, a flat-out miracle, that this boy is born, but Luke invites us to recognize that there are so many smaller moments of marvel along the way. When the time came for the child to be born, Elizabeth—worn out and tired, most likely, since God may have meddled with things so she could be pregnant but God didn't actually make her younger and pregnancy at any age is rough on the body—Elizabeth is ready to bring this child into the most respectable standing she can. Brian P. Stoffregen writes, “In the birth/infancy narratives, Luke emphasizes the Jewishness of our Christian origins. Zechariah is a priest serving the temple in Jerusalem. Elizabeth is a descendant of Aaron—the first priest. They have a priestly heritage. They are also both described as being ‘righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord’...As we would expect from such a couple, they follow the law and have their son circumcised on the eighth day. Besides fulfilling the law, this event is also when a child is named. Also, by naming the child, the father claims him/her as his own.

“‘Zechariah’ is the name of more than thirty people in the Bible. Frequently it is a name related to the priestly Levite tribe: a Levite gatekeeper, a Levite harpist, and a trumpet-blowing priest who led David's procession accompanying the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. There is also a prophet Zechariah, who was the son of a priest, who was stoned by the people. The name means ‘Yahweh

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<sup>3</sup> Θαυμάζω, [Strong's Greek: 2296. θαυμάζω \(thaumazó\) -- To marvel, to wonder, to be amazed](#)

remembers’—a name that would be quite appropriate for Zechariah and Elizabeth as God had remembered them in their old age and given them a son.”<sup>4</sup>

The family and friends and gawkers and onlookers at the circumcision, then, think that of course this will be another Zechariah, carrying forth the legacy. Small miracle, however: Elizabeth says no. “His name will be John.”

Just a note to remember: *will be*. It’s future passive; this will be true, when the child becomes himself as he grows.<sup>5</sup>

The family and friends and gawkers are not comfortable with this; there are no Johns in the family branch, this is unexpected, Elizabeth clearly doesn’t know what she’s doing, poor thing, old and barren for so long as she was. So they turn to Zechariah, thinking the man of the household will have some more sense.

Zechariah, remember, has been mute for nine months. After responding to the angel who told him Elizabeth was pregnant with an only slightly more dignified version of “yeah, right,” Zechariah has functionally been put in the corner to think over his actions “until these things occur.”<sup>6</sup> And he does; nine months of silence has taught him to listen, because he doesn’t even have the ability to speak yet. Small miracle: he writes down, “His name is John.” *Is*. Present active, right now, this boy is John.<sup>7</sup>

*Ethaumasan*,<sup>8</sup> [a-THAU-mah-sahn] and they wondered, they were amazed, they were filled with awe.

This is the minor miracle, the thaumaturgy, the work of wonder: that Zechariah learned to listen instead of proclaim, that the neighbors realized that

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<sup>4</sup> [Luke 1:57-80](#), CrossMarks

<sup>5</sup> [Luke 1:60 - Original Greek Text](#)

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:20

<sup>7</sup> [Luke 1:63 - Original Greek Text](#)

<sup>8</sup> ἐθαύμασαν,

their assumptions meant nothing here, that God did not come with a roar but the whisper of a different name to say *everything is about to change*.

John—“short for ‘Johanan’ or ‘Jehohanan’ meaning ‘God shows favor’ or ‘God has been gracious’”<sup>9</sup>—is also a suitable name for this unexpected child, but more to the point John is his own quiet miracle of God refusing to fit into expectations. Here is an older couple well past childbearing having a son; here is a woman whose social standing as the wife of a priest is erased by the stigma of her barrenness and yet she speaks out that this child will not be a continuation of what already is; here is a man used to power and audience learning humility enough to say, effectively, *I have been corrected, I will trust God’s promises*; here is a crowd of people realizing that something far more significant than a naming ceremony is happening here. This is wonder-working, and it comes to those who allow themselves to see it.

The series we’re using this Advent that asks how a weary world can rejoice points out for this text that “in this week’s sub-theme, the language ‘allow ourselves’ is intentional.”<sup>10</sup> In the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season—of any season, really, in our fast-paced and unstoppable lives, in the expectations that tower over us such that even this sermon puts my words in the room with you when I am too ill to be there—we so easily forget to see the tiny wonders around us, the joy of the small miracles. It is the pink-orange sunrise this morning, or the way a pine tree smells cold and sharp and solid, or that one college friend who still sends a Christmas card every year despite the rest of the relationship having fallen away a decade ago, or the taste of the cookies that Grandmother only bakes for Christmas Eve, or the thousand and one other moments that are not big or life-

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<sup>9</sup> [Luke 1.57-80](#), CrossMarks.

<sup>10</sup> “How Does a Weary World Rejoice? Sermon Planning Guide,” by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. Sanctified Art, [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BEJyD5OZ23ZQNeGVLfkcDaN8HP\\_IyCvj](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BEJyD5OZ23ZQNeGVLfkcDaN8HP_IyCvj).

altering in themselves but are the bindings of our relationships with each other, the things that amaze us when we actually take the time to *see* them.

And John—the boy who is John, the man who will be John—leads us there. He will spend his whole life doing it, pointing to the everyday miraculous, doing thaumaturgy of his own as he becomes someone who pushes against empire and tradition to say that God is doing a new thing. “On the one hand,” writes Professor Brittany Wilson of Duke Divinity School, “John fulfills the prophet Isaiah’s words about the one who will ‘prepare the way of the LORD’ (Isaiah 40:3), or the one who will usher in God’s restoration of Israel. Gabriel speaks of this restoration when he says that John will ‘make ready a people prepared for the Lord’ (Luke 1:17), and Zechariah confirms that John will ‘go before the Lord to prepare his ways’ (1:76). When John grows up, his ministry of baptizing and his proclamation of repentance bring these words to fruition, and Luke reminds us of this by quoting these verses from Isaiah in full (Luke 3:4–6; see also Isaiah 40:3–5).

“On the other hand, however, John’s fulfillment of Isaiah moves the prophet’s words in a new direction because of the identity of the one called ‘Lord.’ As the narrative progresses, we learn that Gabriel’s reference to ‘the Lord’ does not just refer to God but to Jesus, since ‘the Lord’ (*ho kyrios*) is one of Luke’s favorite christological titles (a title that Elizabeth first proclaims to Mary in 1:43: ‘And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?’). The ‘way’ that John prepares, therefore, is not just for God but for Jesus, whose identity as *kyrios* inextricably links him to God’s own self. With this shockingly high Christology, Luke insists that Jesus, though born of the virgin Mary, is also inseparably bound to the God of Israel.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [Commentary on Luke 1:5-13 \[14-25\] 57-80 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#), 2023

This, too, is wonder-working: that John will take his cousin born in a manger and speak of Him as part of God, as God Himself, as the one for whom Israel has been preparing. This, too, is wonder-working: that we, here, thousands of years later, still prepare ourselves one week at a time to hear the news that a child is born in Bethlehem and nothing has ever been the same again. This, too, is wonder-working: that a woman spoke her truth and a man backed her up, that a crowd of neighbors was amazed, and that the question, “What then will this child be?” had so many unexpected answers.

There is trouble, and fear, and empire, and violence, and we who stand at the end of 2024 feel an uncomfortable kinship with the world into which John was born, a world where a woman’s voice was overridden and a tyrant enforced an unpeaceful peace and joy was something that did not come easily. But we, just as Elizabeth and Zechariah, just as their neighbors, are called to allow ourselves to be amazed, to do the thaumaturgy, the wonder-work of noticing God among us. There is beauty here, and joy, and hope, and peace, and just ahead of us is another birth, a life lived fully.

May we have the courage to trust God’s work within us; the wonder to see God’s work around us; and the joy to allow God to be at work through us. Amen.