

A Weary World Rejoices sermon series  
Is There Room to Be Amazed? – Luke 1:57-66  
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Not a lot of people know this about me, but I fancy myself an amateur magician. I've picked up a few tricks throughout my life that I use to wow the pre-school crowd. They're so gullible! I can make a coin vanish and then pull it out of someone's ear. I can have someone pick a card and place it back in the deck, then I find it, usually within five tries. And I am especially good at making donuts disappear. But my favorite trick is the one where I pull my thumb off. This is David Copperfield-level magic. Or maybe Doug Henning.

I was showing my thumb trick to a group of kids one day and they were all appropriately astonished, except for one little boy. He watched the trick and shrugged his shoulders. Hmm, a skeptic. So I showed him again, waiting for the look of bewilderment on his little face. Instead, he looked at me and said, "Big deal." I tell ya, nothing deflates a magician like an unimpressed four-year-old. That boy simply refused to be amazed.

When's the last time you were amazed, astonished, rendered speechless by something? In this sermon series, we've been following the journey of Zechariah and Elizabeth, two minor players in Luke's birth narrative. Zechariah is a priest who's told by an angel that his elderly wife, well past child-bearing years, is going to have the son they've been praying for. Zechariah expresses skepticism and is struck mute for the length of the pregnancy.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, is overjoyed at this news, saying, "This is what the Lord has done for me." She spends three months with her cousin Mary, who is also expecting by supernatural means. The two of them rejoice in the miracles growing in their wombs. Mary will give birth to the son of God, and Elizabeth will give birth to John the Baptist, the one who will prepare the way for him.

In our passage today, it's time for Elizabeth to deliver. Up to this point, she's secluded herself, so no one knew she was expecting. Why would she hide this amazing news? Well, the only person who could explain why this elderly lady was Zechariah, and he can't say a word. Maybe it was easier to keep this a secret than to try and make sense of what God was doing in their lives.

We're told that when Elizabeth gives birth, her neighbors and relatives hear of the news and they rejoice with her. I love that! I love that the people closest to Elizabeth find out about this miracle and their first response is to share in her joy. I wish I did that every time I hear of something good happening to someone. But I'll admit, and you can join me if you'd like, that sometimes when something good happens to someone else, I get a little jealous.

I was entering a local coffee shop once and held the door open for the lady who was behind me. We got in line and she offered to let me go in front of her, but wanting to prove that chivalry is not dead, I thanked her and let her go first. That same day, the coffee shop was giving out gift cards to every 50<sup>th</sup> customer. The lady gets the counter to order and the barista says, "Congratulations, you're the 100<sup>th</sup> customer today! You get a \$100 gift card!" Chivalry may not be dead but it sure is overrated! The lady turned and smiled sheepishly at me and left. And I admit I secretly wished that her latte was a bit too hot and just slightly burned her tongue.

There's a word for that: *schadenfreude*. It means to derive pleasure from someone else's misfortune. It literally translates to "harm joy." Instead of being amazed at this lady's good fortune, I got caught up in what I lost because of her. One scholar said that an attitude of

amazement requires the absence of self-preoccupation. If we are so caught up in what's going on with us, we can't be amazed by what God is doing around us, including what God is doing for others.

I think we are culturally conditioned to miss those things. We simply don't allow room in our lives to be amazed. In this age when, thanks to science and technology, we know more and more and more, there's less room for mystery and amazement and awe. We are so self-preoccupied with our own busy lives that it's easy for us to miss the amazing work God is doing. If it doesn't meet our needs, we're not impressed. Big deal.

I've had the blessing in the last few months to take two trips out west and visit some of our country's most glorious national parks. I was simply blown away by Zion and Bryce Canyon and the Grand Canyon. But not everyone feels that way. In her book "Subpar Parks," author Amber Share has compiled a collection of one-star reviews of each national park from disgruntled visitors. So, in an effort to prove that we are immune to amazement, I submit these reviews: Yosemite – Trees block the view and there are too many gray rocks. Yellowstone – save yourself some money. Boil some water at home. Rocky Mountain – I've seen bigger mountains. Hawaii Volcanoes – Didn't even get to touch lava. Sequoia – There are bugs and they will bite you on your face. Grand Canyon – A hole. A very large hole. And our own national park, Mammoth Cave – Cold, dark, damp, and stinky. Because of everything we can accomplish, our threshold for amazement has skyrocketed. And God's not doing anything to make the Rocky Mountains look more majestic. We are immune to amazement.

This is exactly what happened to Zechariah. When a divine heavenly being appears out of nowhere and tells him that his prayer to be a father is going to be miraculously answered, he responds, "Big deal. How do I know this is true?" How often do we look at what God is doing and try to explain it away rather than receive it as the amazing gift it is?

Thankfully, nine months of silence changes Zechariah in substantially ways. It was a time of self-examination, of repentance, of maturing in his faith. When it comes time to name his son, Elizabeth says that his name will not follow the family line, but instead, as the angel instructed, he will be named John. And her relatives say, "Elizabeth, there's nobody in your family named John. Nobody! You can go back 20 generations and there's not a John. You don't have any cousins named John. Your dad isn't named John. Your husband's father is not John. The dog isn't even named John!"

So, the people do what the people did back then, and what a lot of people do now: they discount the woman's opinion and instead go to the man of the house, who, by the way, hasn't spoken for nine months because he didn't trust God. And he writes on a tablet, "His name is John." And what happens when Zechariah makes this proclamation? Luke says of their friends and relatives, "All of them were amazed!" They started talking about it throughout the entire hill country of Judea. "Hey, did you hear about Zechariah and Elizabeth? Yeah, a son! They named him John! And his mom gave him his name. So progressive! God is going amazing things in their lives. I'm so happy for them!" You know the opposite of *schadenfreude*? It's *freudenfreude*. It translates to "joy joy." It means having joy at someone else's joy. In a world where we struggle to find hope, I think we should look for places to celebrate someone else's joy.

In fact, I would argue that's one of the main points of this story and of Luke's entire gospel. God is doing amazing things in and around us, and our response should be joy. Joy in the fact that God has fulfilled God's promises, joy in the grace offered each of us, joy in God's unending love, joy for what God is doing in the lives of others. When we open our eyes to see what amazing things God is doing, how can we not overflow with joy?

Zechariah is proof. His last words spoken were ones of doubt. But after nine months of silence, when Zechariah writes down his son's name, Luke tells us, "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God." The joy of God's miraculous presence in his life compels him to praise God's name. He's no longer looking for explanations or rationalizations; he's simply joyfully praising God for what God is doing in his life.

What is God doing in your life? Is God working a miracle right now? It may not feel like it. You may be facing struggles and challenges that obscure the fingerprints of God. You may be looking around and saying, "Big deal." But I believe that God is present with each of us, working to bring about good in our lives. Healing. Restored relationships. New opportunities. A rebirth, a recreation, a resurrection where we thought our life had been barren. The hand of the Lord is with you. Are you staying silent or are you praising God, letting others see what God is doing?

We all are about to receive the miracle that takes place every year at this time, when a baby born to unwed parents in a manger brings with him the promise of light and life and love. God is breaking into our world, redefining what is natural and expected. This is not an occasional miracle, a flash in the pan, a one-and-done event in a world that will otherwise remain the same. This birth changes everything. Or nothing. Depends on if we're willing to receive it, to claim it, to tell others about it, to let it permeate our lives down to our marrow. Is there room this Christmas for you to be amazed?

Allowing ourselves to be amazed requires a posture of paying attention. Are you paying attention? Are you looking for what God is doing around you? Or are you looking at the Grand Canyon and just seeing a very large hole? "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger." Big deal? Yeah, it's a really big deal. My prayer for us is that, this Christmas, we take a break from all that preoccupies us and we simply allow ourselves to be amazed, amazed by a little baby, tiny and vulnerable, who contains within him the power to change everything, starting with our own hearts. Is there room? Merry Christmas!