

Hear the names Bashar Hafez-al-Assad, president of Syria; Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president Iran; hear Isis and Al-Quaida . . . and we know the evening news is going to be terrorist bad. During the days of John the Baptist and Jesus, it was the names of Tiberius, emperor of the Roman Empire; Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; Philip, ruler of reign of Ituraea and Trachonitis; Lysanius, ruler of Abilene; Annas, and Caiaphas, Jerusalem's high priests that stuck terror in the hearts of souls. Human beings were nothing more than sacrificial pawns in the empire's deadly power games. Overwhelmed by terror and frozen in fear the children of God were afraid to either publically lament and or to raise a voice of protest. Luke (healer and writer of God's Good News) tells us, that it was into this wilderness of Israel's soul that "the word of the God came to John, son of Zechariah."

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the reign of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."



"The Coming of Peace"

"Our children are our meditation."
Buddhist, Jack Kornfeld

Zechariah and Elizabeth's child: John. "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." Luke 1:76-79

In a reflection on this scripture, Rev. Emily Heath wrote: I'll admit that when I read that passage too quickly, I just assume it's about Jesus. It's about a baby, right? One who will make great things happen? One who will proclaim God's mercy, and help us find peace? Only it's not about Jesus, it's about his cousin, John the Baptist, and about what he will do in the world. His father Zechariah, in the first days after John's birth, said all of these things about what his life would be like. What would it be like if parents proclaimed their children's futures this way?

Not in terms of whether or not they'd make the Ivy League or get the corner office, but by blessing them on their journey as children of God? What if we saw our children's births not as the start of an 18-year competitive marathon winding up at college admissions offices, but as the first of many steps on a path of following Jesus, and proclaiming Christ's love for the world? On the day when Zechariah blessed him, all that mattered about John was that his father knew he was a child of promise, and that his father rejoiced that God would choose his son for what came next. I think God still chooses children for this work. But it's up to the adults in their lives to lift them up, and bless them on their path. (Child of Blessing, Child of Promise, 'Wonder,' p. 6)

Hear the word Paris and terrorist comes to mind. So, what do we say as godparents to a child who, after the frightening attack said: 'I am afraid that people will now think that every Muslim is a terrorist.' Might we start by teaching them Zechariah's prophetic prayer. . . a prayer that prepares the way for the coming of peace by stilling fears?

When Zechariah prayed: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has looked favorably on God's people and redeemed them, that we would be saved from our enemies . . ." he no longer feared that the Lord had abandoned him, but instead, believed that God was present in his time of uncertainty and doubt, saving him.

When Zechariah prayed: "Give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins" . . . he no longer feared that his situation was a punishment from God, but instead experienced his affliction as opening a door of his heart to let God in.

When Zechariah prayed: By the tender mercies of 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" . . . he lost his fear of and grew a compassionate spirit for lost souls.

The kind of prayer that Zechariah prayed was a Jewish prayer of blessing. Prophetic prayers of blessing turn the hearts of those who pray away from the fearful concerns of the self and towards the Holy One, in praise of the peace-making actions of the Lord. They help the praying community think about, straighten out, and repent of the ways in which fear causes a soul to do harm to self and others.

Mary and Joseph's child: Jesus. I wonder, could teaching our children the Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" bind in one the hearts of humankind?

On a visit to South India, the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked to bless the Hindu kitchen staff of a big hotel. This occasion was the annual mixing of the batter for their famous Christmas cake. So, as instructed, he poured honey into an enormous trough of fruit, said prayers, shook hands, and walked out into the searing heat, with "Joy to the World" blaring over the loudspeakers. Christmas, it turns out, is one of the West's greatest exports. The story is known and loved even in places where other faiths predominate: Shanghai, Mumbai, Dar-es-Salaam. And why not? It features a clutching baby and not many people on earth can resist offering a pinky to the clutch of an infant. It may be the thing we long for most, the Archbishop noted---to let go of our aggression and fear and whatever else in us keeps us tied to violence, and bend together over a child in shared wonder and gratitude. Perhaps this common longing is what the old carol means by the "the desire of nations." You don't have to be a Christian to be profoundly gladdened by a story of open, defenseless love. Even when it comes draped in the gaudy tinsel and bows it's accumulated over the centuries, it touches something basic, something universal. And that should make us think twice about ever giving up on the human heart's capacity for goodness and faith, however deeply buried it may seem. ('Wonder' p. 19, Mary Luti)

Prayer. O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of humankind. Bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our Prince of Peace. Amen.