

“Oh cool - they can show you the baby on a split screen now!” This is what Ben said when the ultrasound image appeared. He thought he was looking at the front of the baby and then seeing it from behind in the lower image. The ultrasound tech made no comment to him, she just turned to me and said - mom, what do you see? There are two of them! I responded. What? Ben said. Surprise!

We spent the next 15 minutes or so laughing then crying then laughing then crying - it wasn't easy to parse out which emotion was which. We were excited and terrified and overwhelmed. This had not been our plan. This hadn't even been on our radar screen. This was not how it happened before. It was a complete surprise.

Everything about John's birth is a surprise. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth are thought to be unable to have children and well past the age when they were still hoping to do so. His father - a priest, prepares to enter the holy of holies - the place where God is and then is surprised when God actually shows up in the Angel Gabriel - who then renders Zechariah mute during the pregnancy. His mother finds comfort and solidarity with a much younger cousin, Mary, also unexpectedly pregnant.

And today we saw the story of the surprising name ceremony. Elizabeth and Zechariah are good and faithful Jews - so of course they take John to the temple as was custom - for his circumcision and to name him. Zechariah being unable to speak means they ask Elizabeth what to name him. When she says, John - everyone is surprised. This is not the way things are done. Children are named after family members - it's a very important tradition. It is a way of honoring the good of those who have gone before and setting out hopes for who the child may become.

And so they ask Zechariah about the child's name - and he writes, Surprise! His name is John. And then - all of a sudden Zechariah is able to speak again - everything about this story is unexpected.

Perhaps rightfully so - this is something new. From his parents to his name, John is part of something new that God is doing. It is surprising. And a reminder for us that the graciousness of God does not play out as we expect - it is surprising and new and unexpected. In letting go of the way things have always been done and naming this child John - which, by the way means, “God is gracious.” - Elizabeth and Zechariah signal that the gift of this child is not limited to their family or to their lineage - this child is a gift for the world.

I think all of us get caught looking back and wanting to recreate the past. Sometimes our traditions keep us stuck there - we do things because they have always been done that way - without wrestling with why. We are attached to memories that are comfortable - even when they don't actually tell the full story - even when we've conveniently forgotten the harder parts. None of this is bad - and this is not a sermon on throwing out all the traditions.

But it is a sermon about how we handle those surprise moments - those times when the unexpected comes bursting on the scene like a set of twins on the ultrasound screen.

Sometimes allowing ourselves to experience amazement in the surprises that come - even in the midst of our traditions can lead to growth. Sometimes it would be good for us to be a bit more curious about the unexpected - a bit more hopeful - a bit more full of wonder and awe. Traditions are meaningful and they do matter - but it cannot be a coincidence that this story of surprise and God at work in new ways is bookended by two songs of change and transformation and turning the world upside down.

The surprising events that unfolded around Elizabeth and Zechariah moved their neighbors and all who bore witness to awe. To wonder. They considered these things carefully the scripture says - and were curious - maybe even hopeful as they asked - What will become of this child?

I think it's important for me to confess that the unexpected typically moves me to stress not awe. So I'm preaching this to me right alongside you. I like a plan - and I struggle to cope when it gets upended.

But I do wonder - in light of this story - how might we be more like the neighbors - more like Elizabeth and Zechariah. How might we choose to look ahead with awe - trusting God can do new things with, for and among us?

This is especially important in this season - Christmas time carries with it the pressure of traditions - the pressure of how your family has always does it - the pressure of how your neighbors are doing it - pressure to CREATE the wonder and awe - which is different than allowing ourselves to feel it. It also can be a time where we are so familiar with things that we miss the beauty of it all. We can think - eh - I've heard that story before - and miss out on the unexpected or the new. We guard ourselves against looking or feeling gullible or naive. We explain things away as if sometimes the explanation for how things unfold isn't also wonder-filled.

This season in the life of Stone church may also be a time where the discipline of allowing ourselves to feel awe may be important - in the face of some unknowns around finances - how might we choose to wonder? How might we look for what new things God could do? Is there amazement to be found, even in uncertain times?

Once again, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and those with whom they surround themselves, point us toward ways of being that may help us. The scripture says that they talked about these things that were happening - they pondered them deeply together. They risked sharing the awe together - risked admitting the fear and excitement and overwhelm together. They shared in each other's wonder. They asked questions and kept an open mind.

What will this child become, they asked. What will these children become? What will we - each of us children of God - what will we become?

I wonder...

I wonder...

Amen.