

Living with God's Touch • Luke 1:57-66

Although I receive the newspaper every day, often I don't have the time to read it very thoroughly. But on holidays and Saturdays I like to take the extra time to take a closer look.

Each day's news is loaded with the once-in-a-lifetime stories of people most of us don't know. Some are the stories of births; more are stories of deaths. Some won millions in the lottery while others lost everything they owned in a flood. There are the stories of car accidents, business promotions, suicides and homicides, elections and evacuations.

The more stories I read the more insensitive I'm tempted to become. I find myself taking for granted the matters of major importance in the lives of the people who made the news. After all, what is unusual for those involved becomes just one more story in the newspaper.

For example, world population is growing by 90 million people each year. That means that there are 90 million more births than deaths every twelve months. For every one of those children the date of birth will be remembered and celebrated throughout the rest of life. For parents it is significant. But for the statistician, for the midwife, for the recorder in the county clerk's office, it's just one more birth. It all depends on your perspective.

Let me share with you the story of a birth that took place a long time ago in one of the eastern Mediterranean provinces of the Roman Empire. It is recorded in Luke 1:57-66:

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

These were quite ordinary events. The birth of a child—not front page news, ordinary by most measures of importance. Elizabeth began having contractions. Typically a husband was not allowed to be present for a birth so relatives were sent for, probably a midwife. The labor intensified. The child was born. It had happened mil-

lions of times before and it would happen millions of times again.

If anything made this birth different it was the age of the parents. No one knows for sure how old Zechariah and Elizabeth were, but usually that

means that the numbers are really exceptional. Elizabeth probably had entered menopause; Zechariah may have been much older.

They bore a son. The child's destiny was somewhat determined from the moment his gender was known. He would be a priest like his father and grandfather and every male in the family line back 1500 years to Aaron. They had all been priests. That dictated his training. It even determined who he would marry for he had to marry someone who had unquestionable and documented Jewish heritage.

Next came the name. Jewish law required that boy babies be circumcised when they were eight days old and named at that time. Not so for female babies. They could be named any time during the first month of life.

While it wasn't law that sons had to be named

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after relatives, it certainly was a strong tradition. It was then, as it is now, a way to honor the family. So everyone expected that he would be named Zechariah, just like his father.

Many of us have names that come from our own family traditions. For example, my grandfather was named Charles. My father, too, was named Charles, a name I don't think he ever really liked. He usually signed his name using his first initials. I don't recall anyone ever calling him Charles—it was always titles or nicknames instead. As a boy I remember hearing my father say he “wouldn't name a dog Charles.” My middle name is Charles. My father did what he was supposed to do; he named his son Charles (whether he liked the name or not).

That's the way it was in Jewish Judea 2000 years ago. You named your son after a relative whether you liked it or not. So when Elizabeth suggested that their son be called “John”, there was a stir. At worst she was naming him after an old boyfriend or a recent lover. At best, she was asserting herself beyond the traditions and speaking out of turn.

To everyone's amazement, her husband Zechariah agreed! He picked up a writing tablet (probably a flat piece of wood with a thin coating of wax, marked with a stylus) and wrote rather dogmatically, “His name is John”, like it was already determined and not open to debate.

Zechariah had been unable to speak for at least nine months. When he affirmed the name of the baby he was finally able to talk again. It was as if he had been in a period of post-trauma shock and suddenly recovered.

So, yes, there were some unusual aspects to the birth and naming of John Ben Zechariah, but hardly the making of history books.

What happened next is universal in human society—gossip! Interestingly, the origins of our English word “gossip” are from the word for “godparent”. Those who gossiped were the closest relatives and friends who discussed together the private lives of others.

To us, gossip usually has a negative meaning but that's not quite fair. Gossip can actually be good or bad—it's just talking about other people.

However you label it, the people of Judea really got into it. Luke says in Luke 1:65, “The

neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.”

There probably wasn't much else to talk about. There were no newspapers or television. Gossip was the way society communicated—and the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth was the news of the day. So everybody talked it up. And there was plenty to talk about.

The age of Elizabeth and Zechariah was a good place to start. Perhaps people whispered about their sexual activity at their advanced age and questioned whether that was appropriate. They may have talked about how unusual it was for a woman so old to become pregnant. They calculated how old John's parents would be when he celebrated his 18th or 21st birthday—if they lived that long.

Others perhaps spoke about Zechariah's disability. Was he unable to speak? Was he faking? What happened to him back there at the temple behind the curtain? When he went in he could talk; when he came out he couldn't. What made him start talking again when his son was eight days old? Zechariah's disability made him different; people love to talk about differences.

And then, of course, there was gossip about the name, John. What was all that about? Was there some special meaning? Was baby John destined to become someone different? Special? Would his unusual name be an asset or a liability? Was this the start of some new trend in naming babies?

The point is that this story could be seen as quite ordinary. Another birth. Another name. Some more gossip—there is always gossip! Just like all of our lives. They are special to us but ordinary to most others. We are born; we are named; we live our lives; we die and are soon forgotten. There is little in our memories to distinguish one person from another or today from yesterday or tomorrow.

Ordinary. Ordinary. Ordinary. All the events of life are ordinary. Unless, of course, you take a completely different perspective—the perspective that was adopted by Zechariah and Elizabeth—a perspective that sees and feels God's touch on every event that takes place. Then the ordinary events are all extraordinary.

Look again at Luke 1:57-58: “When it was

time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.”

The point of the story isn't how old she was or what they named her son. The point of the story is that God had shown them great mercy. But how did everyone know about this joy? Not from Zechariah because he couldn't talk. They must have known it from Elizabeth. Elizabeth interpreted what happened to her as an act of God. Miracle? Maybe. That wasn't the point. The point was that God cared and that God was involved in every detail of her life.

When her son became a man Jesus said he was the greatest man that ever lived. Without a doubt he had a head start with a mother who believed that from the moment of conception and before God was central in her pregnancy and in her son's birth.

Tell me, is that the way you see the otherwise ordinary events of life? Do you see God in all that happens? In the positives and the negatives? In the pleasant and the painful? Do you consider everything to be touched by the hand of God? When you tell others of your pregnancy, about your new job, about the house you just bought, of the vacation you're going to take this year—is God always at the center of your understanding of every detail of your life? When you are full of joy, do your neighbors and friends always connect that to what God has done for you?

When Elizabeth and Zechariah named their son they didn't have much of a choice. An angel from God said that his name should be John, which in their language meant “God's gift”. Every time Zechariah or Elizabeth would speak his name, JOHN, it was a reminder of God's touch on their lives. This was not just some child to perpetuate a family name. This child was always to be considered a gift from God himself, with a unique destiny that was his alone. These parents were to serve as God's agents to help make this boy all that God wanted him to be.

In some ways it seems easy to be the parents of a child destined to greatness. Some parents

seem to have children who raise themselves and who follow a straight path to godliness and to greatness. But others have children who are difficult from the day they are born. They take a lot of painful detours in their journeys to fulfilling God's destiny for them.

The reality is that parenting is never an easy task. Not even for Elizabeth and Zechariah whose son grew up to wear strange clothes, ate weird food, hung out in the desert like a hermit, became a political rebel and eventually was imprisoned and beheaded by the king.

The greater lesson is that every parent should look for God in every child. That doesn't mean that every child is godly but that every child is part of God's plan. God is there and active in the details from the birth to naming to adulthood.

Godly parents see nothing ordinary about their children. Everything is seen as extraordinary because of God. They are convinced that God is always there, that God always cares, that every detail of every day is surrounded and saturated with the supernatural.

When we see God in all the details of our lives we can't help but talk about it.

Even Zechariah's inability to speak was understood in terms of God's will and purposes. Call it his illness; call it his disability; call it whatever you want—but this godly couple

believed God had his purposes in their limitations.

Even the gossip centered upon God:

The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord's hand was with him.

I can't think of anything better than turning gossip to God. Because Zechariah and Elizabeth related everything in their otherwise ordinary lives to God, so did their neighbors and relatives. People saw the hand of God in and on this family, so that's what they talked about.

It's the same today. When we see God in all the details of our lives we can't help but talk about it. God is engaged in our friendships, marriages,

jobs, finances, health, children, politics, leisure, victories, defeats, health, sickness and more. To paraphrase the traditional wedding vows: when we are Christians we see God in richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, in better and in worse. Everything in life is connected to God. All of life is centered upon and interpreted in terms of him.

I find that there are three basic categories by which most people interpret life: secular; evil; God. Secularists are not necessarily anti-God; they just don't take God into consideration. Life centers on them. They assume a natural ordinary understanding of everything that happens in life. There is a reasonable explanation for everything. Coincidence explains all that occurs.

Those who interpret life in terms of evil don't necessarily worship or follow Satan, but they see the hand of evil in everything that happens. They always assume the worst. They sense that demons are everywhere and that everything that occurs in life has some type of Satan connection. Their lives are centered in the power of sin. Sin, evil, Satan and demons are their explanation to everything that happens.

Those who interpret life in terms of God are like Zechariah, Elizabeth and those they influenced. They see God in everything. All of life is seen in terms of God's involvement. There is a never-ending sense of God's presence and power, even in the smallest and most ordinary events of life. These Christians love the truth of Philippians 2:13, that it is "God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose." They live their lives by the words of Romans 8:28, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." They are Christians who live out I Corinthians 10:31, "É whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

This is not to say that those who interpret all of life in terms of God are unaware of the power and reality of evil. It's just that they center their lives in God himself. For them all of life is living with God's touch.

From now on, I invite you to look for God's touch in every detail of your life! See him in your relationships. Hear God in your dreams. Watch for him in your work. Expect him in your home. Please him in everything you say. Honor him in everything you do.

May the most ordinary events of life become extraordinary and supernatural because of God's touch on every part of your life.

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