

Blessing the Child (Luke 1.68-79)
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There was a trick I learned during my years as a hospital chaplain. It was a trick that was taught to me by some of the nurses in intensive care, a trick meant to serve as a tonic for our worst days in the hospital. Our worst days, of course, involved a lot of trauma, a lot of death, a lot of exhausting work being present to patients and their families during some incredibly difficult moments. And occasionally, at the end of one of those worst days, the trick would be invoked. Alone, or in small groups of maybe two or three, weary staff members would make their ways to the elevator and push a certain button.

The doors opened on the nursery floor. I can remember a moment when, without much fanfare, I followed a couple of nurses down the corridor and around a corner to the place where big panes of soundproof glass looked in on a roomful of newborn babies. The babies were tightly wrapped and nestled into warmers, their surnames displayed on cards at their feet. Some of them wriggled around, freeing tiny arms to reach for the sky, some cried out, naming a need for the nurse to address, and some slept quietly, motionless save the tiny rise and fall of their breathing beneath the blankets. And just beyond the glass, the weary intensive care staff and the tired chaplain looked in and began to feel the moment working on us. For even on the hardest days, there never was a day awful enough that the newborns couldn't break through it somehow, cast it in a different light, and even hint at something untold and hopeful. Sometimes it was just enough to invite what I think might be a universal response. A staff member, putting a hand to the glass, whispering in the tender voice reserved for infants, and even beginning

to hum a song. And though the glass was thick, I am inclined to think that the music was one and the same. Newborn cries on one side and worn old songs on the other.

I couldn't help but be drawn back to that nursery window this week when I opened the suggested lectionary readings and found the Song of Zechariah. For the Song of Zechariah is, in its essence, simply an ancient Hebrew blessing that we are told was once hummed by a parent who looked upon a child and began to hope for the child's future. If there is an older song or a more sacred one, then I'm not sure I know what it is.

According to the Book of Luke, we are told that after a woman named Elizabeth and a man named Zechariah had a child, they named him John and his father sang him a song. Of course, the sacred stories are full of old songs sung to children. Songs sung by women like Hannah and Mary. Each of the songs, interestingly enough, is infused with a longing for justice, and Zechariah's song is no different. In it, he expresses the strong hope that the child himself will grow up to be a prophet, a prophet of the way of peace. He sings of this hope, we are told. "You child," he hums, "will be called a prophet of the Most High." And though "Most High" may not be language we liberal congregationalists would use much any more, choosing instead from a variety of terms that began with Paul Tillich and have got progressively more interesting ever since, there may still be a universal sentiment that we can find here. For regardless of how we choose to name sacred things and no matter how awkwardly we fumble for the words or argue over their meanings, it seems to me that a baby can cut through all of that to present us with the sterling silence of a genuine mystery. Soon enough we may have dropped all our terms or simply traded them in for the sincerity of a hum or the gentleness of a lull-a-bye.

Maybe children are prophets in that sense, maybe Zechariah was right. But what else do these young prophets call to mind? And what exactly would they ask of us?

It is my contention that children are the prophets of our common humanity. If we learn to see the children, then they will bring us a certain blessing. It is the blessing of our best selves, of our most beautiful ideas, and our deepest hopes for the future. But this is not just a blessing meant to offer us comfort or ease our minds after a difficult day. It is a blessing meant to help us find the work that is ours and then sustain us in the struggle. And when we think about the work that is ours it seems more than a little appropriate to begin with the children. If the children are a blessing to us, then we might ask ourselves how we have or haven't offered our blessing to them in return. Now. The babies I mentioned earlier, the ones in the hospital nursery were relatively well cared for. The hospital where I worked was a private hospital. So each of the babies there had health insurance, teams of doctors, around the clock nursing care, and even strangers looking through the window smiling at them and humming. You could say that, in a way, they were blessing us all and we were blessing them back. But this is not the case for every baby born in our city and state. It is not the case at all. Perhaps I should explain.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, Texas is currently home to the nation's largest population of uninsured children. Over 20% or 1.4 million of our state's children have no health coverage whatsoever. Fully half of those 1.4 million children are eligible for either Children's Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), but have either never enrolled in such a program or have been cut from the rolls in recent years. These figures should be, in no uncertain terms, an embarrassment to every person

who lives in the state of Texas. At least I was embarrassed when I did some research earlier this week. Just listen to some of the things I learned.

I've already mentioned that Texas has the worst record of any state when it comes to insuring our children, leaving better than one in five kids with no coverage. According to the U. S. Census, however, this is not due to a lack of work. More than 80% of those uninsured kids have at least one working parent, they just fall into the category of the working poor. So the vast majority of uninsured children are cared for by one or two working parents who simply can't afford the cost of private insurance. This is where state and federal programs like Medicaid and CHIP are supposed to come in and assist working families with the most basic form of medical coverage. Unfortunately, as I mentioned a moment ago, hundreds of thousands of eligible kids do not receive any benefits. There are a number of reasons for this, the most cynical of which involve the state government's increasingly complicated system of enrolling and re-enrolling in these programs.

Let's take the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) as an example. CHIP is designed for low-income families who have the ability to pay a very modest amount for health care but cannot afford the private premiums which, according to the Texas Department of Insurance, now average \$11,000 per year (\$917 per month) for a family. The CHIP program, we should remember, is funded by our tax dollars. It is a program that we've already paid into in order to help the working poor. But over the past several years, our state government has made the CHIP program not only more difficult to apply for, but more difficult to stay in once a family is accepted. For instance, a family used to have to re-enroll in CHIP annually. Now families must re-enroll every six months.

Enrollment forms used to be shorter and relatively easy to complete, with re-enrollment forms asking simply for verification of information with a note if there were any significant changes. Now the same forms are three or four times longer asking applicants to begin from scratch every time. In the past, if a family qualified for CHIP coverage they were not required to wait for it to begin. Now there is a minimum three-month wait period after the application is accepted. (During these months the family is not insured.) In the past, families were not asked to pass an “assets test.” Now they are looked at very carefully and required to prove that they have less than \$5000 in assets. If a working family has a second car or even a modest savings for the future, this is often enough to disqualify them from coverage. The practical result of these increasingly hostile policies is that today our state has 200,000 fewer kids enrolled in the Children’s Health Insurance Program than it did four years ago. But it gets worse.

During this fiscal year (FY2006) our state left unspent nearly \$400 million dollars in funds allocated for Children’s Medicare and CHIP. This is money that has already been paid in, but was not doled back out to some of Texas’ poorest children. Adding to the scandal is that as children have been cut from the rolls and money has been left unspent, Texas has literally lost hundreds of millions of additional dollars in federal matching funds for health care. While all of this has been happening, as children and families lose their medical insurance or have their applications rejected through an increasingly difficult process, the more cynical of our state politicians have boasted about our financial surplus, telling all who will listen that we now have money in the bank for a rainy day. And I’m sorry. But some part of me has become really rattled by what’s happening in our state. I think it might be the most deeply human part of my self. I think

it might be the part of myself that used to put a hand to the glass in the nursery, to look at those newborns and to feel that as they offered us their strange, unspeakable blessing, we should offer them our blessing in return. And this week when I read about old Zechariah, singing his song that the child would be a prophet, I couldn't help but hear some newfound sense of urgency. What if the child, what if all the children, are prophets trying to lead us to our common humanity, a humanity that I'm not sure we've yet found here in Texas.

I know these are difficult and, in some ways, discouraging thoughts. They are not the thoughts that I had hoped to highlight during Advent. But at the very heart of our religious tradition lies the affirmation that what is sacred can be found in expectant parents, in the birth of a child, in the hope for the future and in the songs that we choose to sing. And today I wonder if we can't hear Zechariah's old song as a kind of work song. A song that we can sing as we work together to figure out how this community might raise its voice on behalf of all the children of our city and state, children who will be the blessings of the future if there are to be any, children who ask us now if we can bless them in return by caring for their most basic needs. And we can. The Children's Defense Fund and other groups working on health care for children in Texas recommend that each of us takes the very simple step of asking those who represent us to remove some of the barriers to Children's Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program. Their recommendations include things like requiring re-enrollment only once per year, eliminating the \$5000 asset test, taking away the three-month waiting period for coverage, and investing in outreach and education so that working poor families can learn about the health care resources available to them. These are easy things to do and they

are well within our reach. We already have the money. All we need to add to it is the time and energy it takes to get the word out, to speak with those who would represent us, and to make common cause with other groups who are working to meet the basic needs of our children. I can't think of a more appropriate response to a time of year when our religious tradition asks us to remember the story of the birth of a child, and to find within that story the name of all that we hold to be sacred.

Near the end of his song, Zechariah sings that one day, "By the tender mercy of God, the dawn...will break...to give light to those who sit in darkness...to guide our feet into the way of peace." And if we are ever to find that way of peace, then I think it may only be by embarking upon it. By deciding that we are not content to wait and that we are not okay to put children's needs on the backburner. Not this year. Not this season.

The poet Carl Sandburg put it best. "There is only one child in the world," he wrote, "and the child's name is All Children." This is the hope that we carry with us. The hope that in one child we will find all children and, having found them, we will work to give them our blessing. May it be so.

(I relied heavily upon the following groups and their websites for the statistics in this sermon: Children's Defense Fund Texas – www.cdf-texas.org, Health Care for All Texas – www.healthcareforalltexas.org, and Physicians for a National Health Program – www.pnhp.org. I also relied on a telephone interview with Dr. Ala Malinow, a pediatrician at Houston's Ben Taub General Hospital and president-elect of Physicians for a National Health Program. Finally, I am grateful to Covenant's own Dr. Joe Bak, another member of PNHP and his partner, Linda Phenix, who have worked tirelessly to bring healthcare issues into our consciousness. The Carl Sandburg quote is from *Bless This Child: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations, and Readings to Celebrate Birth*, edited by Edward Searl.)