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Luke 1:5-20; 24:44-53

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
A BLESSING AFTER THE BENEDICTION

What are you doing here? It can be asked gruffly when the questioner believes that the people in question shouldn't be where they are. Or it can be an evaluative or purpose-driven question. What are you doing here? I hope that didn't sound gruff because you are where you should be. Let me try to explain why.

First, let me acknowledge that our first scripture lesson today from the beginning of Luke would normally be one we might hear in December during Advent instead of on the Sunday when we hear of Jesus' final appearance to his followers. But at times, it makes some sense to take note of where a story begins and where it ends. In the Gospel of Luke, it is the same place – sort of.

According to Wikipedia, there are plays, memoirs, novels, television episodes and series, films, songs, and 34 albums entitled "Full Circle." If we come full circle, we return to the same place or condition we were in some time ago. The Gospel of Luke begins its telling of the Jesus story in the temple in Jerusalem with a priest named Zechariah carrying out an act of worship. And it ends not just with Jesus ascending into heaven, but with a little detail after his ascension – that the disciples with great joy were continually in the temple in Jerusalem blessing God. There are always a variety of ways to tell a story. The setting the author uses likely indicates something. Luke could have started and ended his gospel account in a variety of locales, but he takes us to the temple, the place where those who sought the very presence of God went.

Acts of worship are taking place at the beginning and at the end, and in both cases, God is about to do something wondrous. Zechariah thought he had reached the pinnacle when by drawing lots, he was the priest chosen to enter the temple to carry out the incense offering. This was viewed as a once-in-a-lifetime honor for a priest to get to pray for the forgiveness of sins for all of God's people. And yet, as special as that was, an angel, a messenger from God, showed up unexpectedly during the middle of this most special expression of worship to shock Zechariah. The angel's presence was surprising enough, but the message straight from heaven was even more so. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who had not been able to have children and were now beyond normal child-bearing years, were going to have a baby to be named John, who would prepare the people to receive God's presence, God's embodied love, in a new way. Zechariah expresses his incredulity that he and his wife could have a child and the angel strikes him mute for a while. In silence, he could ponder that God was about to do something wondrous.

In the other story that concludes Luke's Gospel, the disciples, who had experience the embodied love of God, go through the shock of Jesus' execution. Then there is the even greater shock of his resurrection. Soon thereafter, he departs from them, and yet, they were filled with joy that his love was going to be present with them and alive for them forevermore. Where they had only been able to experience his presence in one place at a time, soon his presence would be available everywhere through the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were not struck mute like Zechariah, but they would not be ready to boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus until the Spirit had come upon them. However, they were frequently together in worship, not only giving thanks to God for what had happened, but they were full of anticipation about the wondrous thing God was going to do next.

We come to gather in worship with a variety of things on our minds and hearts. The things for which we are thankful get mixed in with a variety of anxieties and distractions. As we quiet ourselves during the opening voluntary, perhaps the to-do list is scrolling through our minds. As we scan the bulletin, we might wonder about the hymns chosen for the day. Is there

room for us to focus on the presence of God and how that might change our little world? One of our country's great poets died this week. It is clear from the media focus on her work since the news broke that Maya Angelou touched many with her words. Good poetry can often go beyond its original context to offer meaning in another setting. Even though the following poem is entitled "Touched by an Angel," I dare say the setting the poet had in mind was not one of a worship service. However, as I, like many others reviewed some of Maya Angelou's work this week, I was struck by the possibility of why an encounter in worship might be a transformative event. These are her words:

*We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.
Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.
We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.¹*

I've never had an encounter with an angel in a time of worship like Zechariah did. But I have been touched by an angel called divine love and have been filled with joy, gratitude, and anticipation. What would happen if we changed our outlook about coming to a service of worship, where we thought primarily of it as coming to an encounter with God's love? Perhaps the variety of chains of fear that hold our souls would be struck away. Would it be more likely that we would be weaned from our timidity in the flush of love's light? I dare say that we would come to this time with greater anticipation in our hearts about the encounter in this room and beyond this room.

I have gotten to serve two different congregations before I came to serve Warner. When I was worshipping for the last time in each of those congregations, the most emotional time in those services for me were when I got to offer a benediction one last time. It is a great privilege to ask for, to declare God's blessings to be upon a congregation. Since God is One who is generous with blessings, each week I can do so with a measure of confidence, not in my words, but in the One whose love for us overflows the boundaries of this time of worship.

Next Sunday is Pentecost, the time when the very Spirit of God was poured out upon the church, enabling it to carry forth the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. Here we are in a time of worship and something wondrous is about to happen. Here we are in a time of worship and a wondrous Someone is loving us into a wondrous future. Here we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/touched-by-an-angel/>