

New Testament: Luke 1:68-79

word count 1,838

Old Zechariah has been struck mute upon hearing that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child in old age. Later, she has given birth to a son, and his parents have brought him to be circumcised and named. Elizabeth wants the name “John,” and when others question why Zechariah does not want the child named after him, he writes “John” on a tablet, whereupon he is immediately able to speak. In fact he is “filled with the Holy Spirit ...and spoke this prophecy” which we know as the *Benedictus* – the Latin translation of “Blessed” and it tells of the blessing God brings to God’s people. The child of course, is John the Baptist, and John’s mission will be to bring people to an ethical way of living, thus preparing the way for “the Lord.” At a time when hopes are at a low ebb and people are particularly in need, he will be a beacon guiding them into “peace,” i.e. wholeness, harmony, well-being, prosperity and security. It is a story of rescue and fulfillment, and about a new dawn that is here at last.

Several years ago, I moved to Chicago for part of the summer to begin my Doctor of Ministry program. My colleagues chose to live in student housing near the Lutheran Seminary where our classes were held.

I couldn’t do it. Not just because I am too old to live in a dorm with a roommate (I am), but because I love large cities and I did not know Chicago. This was an opportunity to explore a new place. I rented a small, furnished apartment near the Navy Pier and it was so exciting to arrive there with my bags and a map of Chicago. I looked out my windows at the city skyline bordered by the lake and I settled in, completely happy and full of expectation.

The program was wonderful and I have made friends for a lifetime. However, I had to add on forty-five minutes each way every day for my commute. I got up early for the walk to the Randolph Street station where the Metra train took me to Hyde Park, followed by a fifteen-minute walk to class. In the evening, I would do it in reverse, but I would walk through the streets of Chicago until I had to go home dog-tired. Walking past the office building where Bob Newhart was once a psychologist, there was always a jazz band playing near the bridge close to the Wrigley Building. Street vendors and performers vied for attention, and crowds moved up and down Michigan Avenue. I went up to the top of the Hancock Building to see the entire city laid out in twinkling lights, and then down the elevators and across the street to a vespers service at the stately Fourth Presbyterian Church. My evenings often ended in people-watching from a local diner or café.

And...I was alone. Anonymous. Not a soul knew me. After a week of such anonymity, it felt as if I had become an invisible part of the landscape; a bit of the wind from the lake, and then my sudden reflection in store windows let me know I was real, or else in the few solid moments when someone asked me for directions and I could give them.

One morning shortly after the realization that I felt completely alone had crept up on me, I was walking toward the Randolph Street station, and I heard a voice—a clear tone issuing a decree for the whole city to hear. “Good Mor-ning Chi-ca-go...Good MOR-ning!” It was a block away, and the voice could be heard over traffic and the sounds of the city. It was a woman’s voice, crying out to the whole city and calling it by name. “Good Mor-ning Chi-ca-go. Good MOR-ning. Today’s the day you been waitin’ for. Today’s the day when everything’s gonna get all-right. I know it. It’s happening already. Say Good-MOR-ning, Chi-ca-go.”

The woman leaned against the wall of the stairwell leading down to the station. She was African-American, and somewhere near my age. She held up a newspaper called “StreetWise,” and

was having some luck selling it to the commuters coming up or going down the staircase. Her eyes shone with brightness, her smile was real, not forced, and she looked at every person as she wished the city a good-morning, whether or not they bought her paper. She glanced right at me, and said, “Good-MOR-ning,” letting me know I was fully alive and ready for the day.

I thought about her on the train, and saw a discarded copy of “StreetWise” and glanced at the headlines. It was a newspaper for homeless or very poor people, and was full of stories from their perspective, which they sold so that people could help out while understanding their world a little better. It was a reporting on and about the world from the viewpoint of the poor and oppressed. In its tone, it was defiantly positive about a new and better day, while reciting the hard facts of the present reality of the world around us, facts that many of us miss.

I have since learned a little more about “StreetWise,” not so much because of the articles I read in it, although they were interesting, but primarily because of the particular voice that called out to the city every morning that good things are going to happen in this good morning that is today. The soul behind the voice shining through those bright and lovely eyes imbued the voice with a ring of authenticity.

For fifteen years, “StreetWise” has provided employment to more than 3,600 homeless men and women, enabling them to secure housing and buy food, clothing and personal necessities. Most importantly, “StreetWise” has served as the opportunity for their journey back to self-sufficiency. The businesses and the City of Chicago have gotten behind it. At the heart of it all is the motivation of the creators and sellers of the paper to expand and evolve “StreetWise.” For these vendors, this “homeless paper” is a bridge to full-time employment, economic stability and self-respect. These are men and women who have made a critical decision to try to improve his or her life situation by becoming involved with StreetWise.

The website for the paper says, “Many American’s live just one paycheck away from homelessness. On top of that, between natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, physical or mental disabilities, and any number of other reasons, one can become homeless. “StreetWise” is the only place where you can become employed immediately with nothing more than a desire to work regardless of your background or situation. Some vendors use “StreetWise” as a stepping stone to other job opportunities while others cherish the opportunity for entrepreneurship and to run their own business.”

So this is why I saw so many copies of this paper being read (or at least carried) alongside the Chicago Tribune and other rival papers. I wondered if I would see her again, and if I did, I would buy her paper. She was not there when I came out of the station that night—the jazz moved on the wind across the bridge, where crowds squeezed across the narrow sidewalks. Anonymous again after a day with colleagues, I slipped home.

The next morning, I walked to the station. “Good Mor-ning Chi-ca-go, Good MOR-ning!” I was listening for her, and when I heard the long, drawled ‘Good Mor-ning,’ it felt like it was said for me. As I got closer, she noticed me, just as she noticed every single person who either stopped to buy her paper or else hustle on to a destination. “Good Mor-ning, Chi-ca-go! Today’s the day YOU been waitin’ for. Today’s the day when everything’s gonna get all-right. I know it. It’s happening already. Say Good-MOR-ning, Chi-ca-go.”

I walked up to her and bought her paper, and in so doing, I lost my sense of anonymity and found the voice I had not used in the city. I took a risk. I told her that hers was the first voice I waited to hear that morning. I said, “I like hearing you say ‘Good Morning’ to the city. It feels like you are watching out for everyone.” Then I asked her name, and she said, “I’m Mary, and I’m going to give you a SPECIAL ‘Good Morning’ every day.”

And she did. Every morning I heard the clock radio and the news on TV. I grabbed a coffee in the lobby and heard the staff speaking and the residents coming in perspiring from their morning

runs, or going out in suits and ties. I heard the traffic and the conversations on the street as I walked to the Randolph Street station where I listened for the first time each day to the voice that called out, “Good Mor-ning, Chi-ca-go. Today’s the day YOU been waitin’ for. Today’s the day when everything’s gonna get all-right. I know it. It’s happening already. Say Good-MOR-ning, Chi-ca-go.” The shining eyes and wide smile focused for a moment on me as if we had a secret, and she always said, “Good Morning” “Good Morning, Mary.” “Paper today? Want to read my news?” “Yes, please.” “Good Mor-ning, Good MOR-ning.”

Mary’s Benedictus comes every day when the city needs to hear it. It is the found voice of Zechariah, suddenly able to speak and to prophesy that good things were on the way. His own Benedictus reads like a copy of “StreetWise,” written by those who know suffering best; those to whom Jesus’ birth was first revealed, and those for whom he healed and taught. Written from the viewpoint of those who know that some new consciousness will have to come among us and convince us that ours is not the path we should be walking on—a path of destruction, separation, isolation, desolation. Something new is coming, something that will deliver us from ills and enemies alike. Her voice is like that of John the Baptist’s, crying out in the unlikeliest of places about a new way that is coming, a way that will “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The voice crying in the wilderness is the sound that ushers in this time of reflection about how things can be made new, restored, saved from the destructive paths that lead in every direction and into a way of ethical living. The Prophet Mary of Chicago is the sound of Advent that is about to come...a time of watching and waiting, of giving hope, peace, joy and love in the message of the season. It is the voice we listen for above all the sounds around us. “Good Mor-ning, World. Good MOR-ning Church. A new dawn is here. Today’s the day YOU been waitin’ for. Today’s the day when everything’s gonna start to get all-right. I know it. It’s happening already. Say Good-MOR-ning, people.”

Sermon Resources

The Revised Common Lectionary Commentary, Proper 29

<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/cpr34m.shtml>

StreetWise, a Chicago publication designed to help homeless or otherwise needy people get back on their feet: <http://www.streetwise.org/>

“Who We Are and What We Do”

“StreetWise is a social enterprise designed to help severely impoverished men and women out of poverty. We publish weekly, “Streetwise,” a general interest newspaper with a gritty “from the streets perspective” to give insight to its readers on what is really going on in Chicago. By using vendors as the distribution mechanism, we are able to personalize the face of poverty and create income for the vendor. By selling “StreetWise” each vendor is given an opportunity to learn important business skills, improve his or her confidence, and ultimately earn enough income to become self-sufficient. The best way out of poverty is opportunity. StreetWise provides people with an opportunity to get started and to help themselves with dignity. In addition to helping our vendors, we also serve any individual who is facing homelessness with access to all the programs and services of StreetWise. Successful participants in the StreetWise opportunity seek a hand up-- not a hand out. You can find StreetWise vendors on nearly every high-traffic corner in downtown Chicago and in various places around the Chicagoland area.” (From website)

Scripture for Sunday, November 25, 2007

Luke 1:68-79

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”