

The scripture lesson for today gives us the infrequent delight of a close look at the origin story of John the Baptist. Even though he's supposed to be the forerunner of Jesus, he often gets short shrift, so I'm glad we can focus on his story today.

It is full of resonances with tradition. We have an elderly couple, righteous and commendable in every way, but tragically without children. Think Abram and Sarai, the ancestors of the Jewish people. Think of Hannah, beloved by her husband but unable to have a child, weeping at the temple to such an extent that the priest thinks she's deranged; she gives birth to the prophet Samuel and dedicates him to the Temple when he has been weaned. Elizabeth and Zechariah are also centered at the Temple. Zechariah is a priest, a descendant of Abijah, and one of a great number of priests who would draw lots to see whose turn it was to perform a particular ritual. I learned this week that there were so many priests that being chosen for this ritual was a once-in-a lifetime experience, so as an old man, Zechariah might have thought that he would never do this.

However, into the Temple he goes at the appropriate moment in the ceremony, to offer incense, while the people remain outside, praying. And in the Temple there appears to him an angel, which terrifies him, so that the angel has to say, "Do not be afraid," as the preface to his good news. The information is this: Your wife will bear a child; you'll name him John; he'll adhere to some purity practices like a nazirite (and like Samson?), and with the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah—who, let us remember, had never died but had been taken up to heaven in a chariot, with the implication that he could and probably would return when the conditions were right—as I say, with the spirit and power of Elijah, this child will go before "him," presumably the messiah, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

And Zechariah, unaccountably, replies to the angel, “How will I know that this is so?” Which, if you think about it, is maybe unnecessarily skeptical. The angel seems just a touch huffy, saying, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.” How will you know? The fact that an angel told you should be a good tip-off, but even if it isn’t, either Elizabeth will have a baby or she won’t; that seems like strong evidence. So Gabriel strikes Zechariah dumb until the prophecy should be fulfilled. This leaves the people outside the sanctuary dangling, because Zechariah can’t pronounce the blessing on them at the end of the ceremony, and the effect on me is the same kind of anxious expectation that I get when I read in the *Bhagavad Gita* about the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, suddenly wondering whether he should really fight, and asking Krishna some hard metaphysical questions, while two armies wait, facing each other, silently.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, seems to know more than you might expect. When she has borne this son, she tells the neighbors and relatives that the baby is not to be named after his father, but is to be called John. This is apparently unexpected, because they all argue with her, and it’s finally settled when Zechariah writes on a tablet, “His name is John.” It was the father’s prerogative to name the baby, but Elizabeth knew the name first. And “John” means “gift of God,” by the way, so she knew *that*. Luke doesn’t tell us how Elizabeth knew, so we’re just left noting and logging the oddness of it all.

Once the child has been named, though, Zechariah’s tongue is loosed, and he is able to speak as the Holy Spirit inspires him, to the effect that God has come through for us as God always does, and that this child will prepare the people to receive their deliverer. Verse 80 tells us, “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and *he was in the wilderness* until the day he

appeared publicly to Israel.”

So this is what caught my attention. We have all these resonances with Abraham and Sarah, with Hannah and the prophet Samuel, with the prophet Elijah—layer upon layer of tradition folded up in this story. *And* we have Zechariah, a priest at the Temple that Ezra had helped to rebuild (if you remember last week’s scripture), a hereditary member of the priesthood just as had been established in the Mosaic tradition—but his son grows up in the wilderness. How is it that one so deeply immersed in the ancestors and in the *precious* Temple, one sent by God to perform a critical prophetic service, grows up in the wilderness?

I think this is the carrying-on of another deep tradition, that of God acting from the margins rather than from the center. Luke’s critique of the Temple is not that there shouldn’t be a Temple, but that in his day it was the province of the religious establishment and all things respectable and prestigious. It had lost touch with the margins, and it served the interests of the powerful. The prophet of the messiah may have a Temple pedigree, but he’s going to be conditioned by wilderness.

And this is what we always have to remember. God moves from the margins, not from the center. Wisdom and spiritual insight come from places you would have sworn were not right. I came across a wonderful essay¹ by a woman named Emily Stobbe who wrote about working in a bridal shop as a spiritual discipline. She writes:

cultural standards of physical beauty perpetually harry my brides. The self-criticism, insecurity and pain of women as they hunch, hide, and whisper their critiques of their bodies is ever present.

It hurts to hear. They never tell me what they love. Only what they hate.

I cannot rewrite the global story of women. But I chose to work in bridal intentionally. Because beauty translates to value in our culture, expanding the definition and experience

of beauty expands value. A nose, an arm, a scar—they become small things, pebbles against the vista that is the experience of loving and being loved.

Her job, she says, “allows me to insist on the beauty (physical, but more importantly everything beyond physical) and value of five or six women a day. That’s five or six encounters with the image of God.”

Stroble goes on to describe a woman with scars on her arms who had had to work to know that she was beautiful, and who lights up when she sees in the mirror that she *is* beautiful. She describes a party of bridesmaids of different body types who rally around each other, saying, “The important thing is that we’re doing this together.” Brides in neighboring dressing rooms, who did not know each other, gasped at each other’s appearance and took selfies together. Again, Stroble:

As I fit dresses, I often touch waists, backs, arms, and feet, adjusting fit, bunching fabric where alterations will be made. I get to bless those criticized, hurt places, and clothe them in silk, lace, and crystal, as if they are altars and shrines. For in each of these women is the fingerprint of Ultimate Beauty. There is a reason that the most beautiful thing, the visual aesthetic referenced so often in Scripture to evoke loveliness beyond the ordinary or even the physical, is the bride arrayed. For what could be more glorious than someone beloved? Beauty is just the aesthetic of value, the symbol of cherishing, the description applied to something precious.

Our culture has created the Bridezilla, the self-centered bride trapped in a golden cage, anxiously trying to create a beautifully staged event at which everything is perfect and way too much money is spent. And that’s real, but in that very troubling and tortured industry Emily Stroble recognized the presence of the holy. She blesses criticized, hurt parts of women and honors them with silk and lace and crystal. She lifts up for the cynical rest of us the holiness of

knowing oneself to be beloved, recognizing in oneself the mark of God who makes us beautiful and beloved. Would you go looking in a bridal shop for spiritual insight? That's the last place I'd look. But in that profoundly secular and materialistic setting, the angel Gabriel also shows up to say, "Good news!"

John the Baptist is sent to be the prophet of the Most High. It is appropriate, then, that John should be formed and conditioned somewhere out-of-the-way, not explicitly religious, perhaps even distasteful or hazardous. It is appropriate that his parents should meet with one surprise after another as a prelude to his birth. He could hardly prepare the way for the kind of Most High messiah that God has in mind if he were more conventional, more easily identifiable as religious and Godly. We have to condition *ourselves* to recognize the holy at the margins and in the unworthiest places; that's how the way is prepared for the coming of the messiah.

ⁱ <https://www.thebanner.org/columns/2019/05/shop-girl-aesthetic-working-retail-as-a-spiritual-discipline>