

Okay, so, there is someone missing from today's two readings from Luke's Gospel. Who is it?

In fact, this person will seemingly not be physically present in the next few Sundays of Gospel readings.

Who is isn't there?

Well of all people, are missing person is JESUS.

What could possibly be going on?

To explore this, the specific text I want to look at today is the passage from Luke that served as this morning's Psalm. Luke 1:68-79

It starts out,

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent a mighty Savior."

Now, this sounds like it's about Jesus. But it doesn't mention Him, yet. At this point, Mary is still pregnant with Jesus.

This part of Luke is a piece of prophetic praise to God that is spoken by Zechariah. Zechariah was the husband of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. And they were the parents of John the Baptist. They were an elderly couple who had never had a child. One day, when Zechariah was doing his priestly duties in the temple an angel appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zechariah couldn't believe it, and as a result he ended up being unable to speak during the entire 9 months of Elizabeth's pregnancy. (Perhaps, much to Elizabeth's relief)

Well, in this passage, their son John the Baptist has been born and it's come time to name this new baby. The extended family want to name him Zechariah, after his dad. But Elizabeth says, "No, his name is John."

So, the family asks Zechariah what to name him. When he indicates to name the baby John, his inability to speak miraculously ends.

Then, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and gives this prophetic hymn of praise to God. Zechariah knows that God has finally sent a new prophet to the Jewish people, after centuries without one. This new prophet is his son John, who will become John the Baptist who will prepare the way for Jesus's ministry.

It's amazing that Zechariah's first words after nine months of muteness are not a complaint about his situation or a statement of relief that he can finally talk but a hymn of praise to God.

Zechariah's hymn is addressing all those places where the Jewish people have thought God has been absent. The people have been wondering when God will act and where is He?

After all, Israel is at this time under the control of the harsh Roman Empire. Things seem pretty hopeless for the Jews under the Roman government.

Just like we might be wondering where is Jesus in our readings today, the people at Zechariah's time are wondering why God seems to be missing from some aspects of their lives.

And as we are asking where is Jesus and wondering about the places He is missing from, it reminds me of the nativity scene that you might have noticed when you came in the doors today. If you came in from the main parking lot, there on your left you would have seen Mary and Joseph, but there's no baby Jesus with them. It's traditional to leave the baby Jesus out of the nativity until Christmas day.

Just like Jesus is missing from the nativity scene out there in the breezeway, just like Jesus seems to be missing from today's readings, we might have places in our own lives where we feel like Jesus just isn't present. Places in our lives where we think

"Jesus. Is. Just. Not. Here."

When I think of a time in my life where I felt like Jesus wasn't present, I think back to when I was teaching freshman writing classes at Southern Illinois University

For some reason, I just couldn't quite connect my faith to my life as a teacher (and it wasn't because I was teaching freshman). I felt like I should keep any mention of it out of the classroom or in my interactions with students. That led to me just ignoring my faith when it came to any thoughts I had about teaching whether it was working in my campus office or even just reflecting on how a week went.

Now years later, I mourn the lost opportunities I had where I could have prayed for my students while I graded their essays or the quiet mornings in my office where I could have spent a few minutes reading a devotional. Being aware of God's work in my life as a writing instructor would have helped me back then in so many ways.

And honestly ignoring God while I was at work created a ripple effect, and I started to ignore Jesus in other areas of my life, to pray less, and eventually I reached a point where I was wondering where is Jesus? Why does it seem like my connection to God is missing in so many places? I didn't feel like God was present in my life.

Today, I want to ask you, where is it you feel like God is missing in your life. Are there places in your heart where you don't feel the presence of God? Maybe in a certain hard relationship you have with someone, or maybe it's not in a hard relationship but a really joyful friendship. You just never think about how God might be working in that relationship.

Are there places in your mind where you don't feel the presence of God? Perhaps, you have some boring or frequent tasks at work or at school, where you just go on autopilot and try to get through them. You just don't consider how God can be there for you in your work or at school.

I am sure we all have places in our daily lives, in our thoughts, in our hearts, where we just don't realize God is present. And so, it seems like God is missing.

Well, despite all of this, I have some excellent news for you. God is present in your life, even in the places or moments where you think He isn't. To start understanding this, let's go back to the first chapter of Luke.

Zechariah's hymn of blessing to God calls on people to notice and remember what God has done and is doing.

The Jewish people feel like God is missing from their daily lives, where they are suffering under the harsh rule of the Roman empire.

But Zechariah says,

"God has raised up a mighty savior for us."

That's Jesus. Jesus who was born to the virgin Mary, taught and healed, died on the Cross for our sins, and rose again.

The Jewish people are starting to wonder whether God's mercy is missing.

But Zechariah says,

"God has shown the mercy He promised."

Zechariah is talking about the coming Messiah, Jesus. Zechariah knows, thanks to the Holy Spirit's empowerment, that his son John is a prophet who is going to grow up to prepare the world for the Savior of all humanity, Jesus.

Zechariah's prophecy tells us God is present, that He worked in the past for all those famous people from the Bible and He is working now in Jesus. Even though Jesus isn't named in this part of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is there.

Even those places in ancient Israel, where the Romans had taken over, where the people had no hope, where no prophet of God had walked for centuries, God was there actively working.

And in those places in your life, where you can't seem to sense or feel or think about God, God is there, working actively, whether you know it or not.

God is working in the person who takes time to ask you how you are doing.

God is active and present at your job, even in those terrible moments where your supervisor has bad news for you or in those boring weekly reports you have to turn in.

God is there for you, in the places in your mind that you feel stressed out about holiday planning, worried about a family member, or overwhelmed by your daily schedule.

God is there for you, in the places in your heart where you are just so worn out that you decide to spend a whole night binge watching a season of The Office on Netflix.

What I want to invite you to do is become aware of God's presence in you, all around you, and available to you all the time.

I want you to be able to say in any moment, "God is here. God is here whether I have a warm feeling or a sense of His presence.

I want you to be able to say, "God is here no matter what I am doing."

So, start to look in all of those places in your life where you haven't noticed or have forgotten or just haven't had the chance to experience God yet. You will experience, as the season of Advent promises, that Jesus is coming into your life and has come and is already there, ready for you to notice Him.

That's practicing the presence of God.

Look for God in your life. Ask yourself what is God doing amidst all this stress I'm under? And you will experience through the power of the Holy Spirit working in you, a growing awareness of God being there with you and for you.

As you go out today and this week, practice an awareness of God's presence in your life, even in those parts of your day, your mind, your relationships, your work that you think

or feel like God is missing. I promise you God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, God is present there for you.

Amen

Advent Lutheran Church