

Original Blessing

Luke 1:57-79

Second Sunday of Advent/ 5th December 2021

The psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-1994) identified eight stages in human development. At each stage, we face a task, and this task throws us into a conflict. The way we face these conflicts, especially the first one, results in either a psychological strength, a virtue, or weakness that we carry with us through the stages. The first stage in his theory of psychosocial development he called *trust vs. mistrust*. It begins at birth and lasts until a child is around eighteen months. According to Erikson, it's the most critical period of a child's life, as it shapes one's worldview and the structure of the personality. The first developmental task is trust vs. mistrust. Can I trust the world around me or not? Can I trust my mother or not? Can I trust my father or not? Can I trust my parents? Are they safe? Is the world safe or not? Does this feel like home, or do I feel uneasy and unsure? The virtue that emerges when a child can trust the world, Erikson said, is hope.¹ And so, you can see why so much depends upon how a child is cared for throughout the first eighteen months. It's foundational. We need to give special care and attention and use all the resources available to us to care for and nurture newborns and infants as they develop. Without that foundation, one comes to feel unsure of oneself, fearful, suspicious, ungrounded; you walk through the world feeling like you've lost your footing; one sees the world as a scary, vicious, alien place, where no one can be trusted. This lack of trust in the earliest stage of life accounts for many of the problems we face throughout our lives—and many of the issues we face in society.

All this might sound deterministic, but it's not. We can, when we're older and become more conscious of our capacity or difficulty to trust, work to build and develop greater trust in our lives through healthy relationships, personal growth, psychotherapy, spiritual development and the life of faith. And spiritual growth or development is particularly relevant here because there's a connection between our capacity to trust and our understanding of and relationship with God. Sometimes it's easy to trust God, and when God can't be trusted (often for good reasons), God has a way of showing up, and compensating for what does not come naturally in our lives.

Reading, wrestling this week with the story of John's birth, it's striking the way trust is a prominent theme. I never really noticed it before. Zechariah and Elizabeth are an old married couple who had difficulty conceiving and bearing a child. They were both righteous, living blameless lives before the Lord (Lk. 1:6-7). Zechariah was a priest. Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. When Zechariah was performing his priestly role in the temple one day, an angel appeared to him near the altar of incense. Zechariah was terrified. He soon learned that Elizabeth will, in time, bear a son and that he will be named John and he will bring joy and gladness into the world. And Zechariah said, "You've got to be kidding." He didn't trust the news given to him. And Gabriel didn't take too kindly to that. "I am Gabriel," he said, "I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak until the day these things occur" (Lk. 1:19). We could say that Zechariah had trust issues.

As far as we know, Elizabeth had no problem trusting this good news. She was grateful for the child growing within her womb (Lk. 1:25). When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, the neighbors rejoiced. When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, everyone thought he would be named Zechariah, after his father. But then Elizabeth said, “No; he is to be called John” (Lk. 1:60), meaning “graced by God.”

No. Defiant. Confident. Assured. Rooted. Trusting in the promises of God, trusting in the faithfulness of God, she refuses to give in to tradition or the expectations of the crowd. She trusts the words of Gabriel; she receives the good news, she trusts it, we could even say she surrendered, yielded her life, her marriage, their destiny, and the fate of this child to God, to the promise. The people, confused, turned to Zechariah to explain.

It’s then, Luke tells us, Zechariah asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” Zechariah now yields, he surrenders to the good news, he receives Gabriel’s message. He can now take this word into his soul, into his heart. This priest, this religious leader, who, one would think, should have known how to be open to receive God’s good news and trust in God’s providence, is now, perhaps more than any other time in his life, firmly resting on the foundational experience of Israel: God is good and faithful and can be trusted, that God desires to bring good news of great joy to all people.

It’s there for all to see and feel and experience if only we remain open to what is being given to us, trusting that it is good, open to what is coming toward us—as in Advent, which means coming. In Advent, we are particularly aware of the first coming of Christ, and the coming of Christmas Day, and the future return of Christ. But, if you think about it, as Karl Barth (1886-1968) once exclaimed, “What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent!”² We are always in Advent. God is always coming toward us. Therefore, like Elizabeth and eventually Zechariah, and later Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, and a whole cast of others, trust is required, a trust in the goodness of God, the faithfulness of God. We’re invited to receive the good news—hear it, take it into our hearts, souls, and lives—that is coming toward us, this good news that can be trusted.

When Zechariah opens his mouth, he praises God. We could say that he returns to God, to the foundation of his life and the foundation of the temple and the foundation of the life of God’s people. He’s thrown or falls upon the foundation upon which his life and our lives are built. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them” (Lk. 1:69). A song. A blessing. Zechariah sings a blessing upon John, to John, into John that will become the foundation of his life, this “prophet of the Most High” (Lk. 1:76), who will prepare the way for Christ—blessing John, blessing the beautiful yet tragic life that will unfold through him. The blessing points back to the past, echoing the many promises made to Israel in the Psalms and the prophets, and the reality of that blessing propels John into his life, into his future. Zechariah entrusts his son to the God he now trusts in a new way, entrusted to the goodness and faithfulness of God, the God who brings redemption, healing, and mercy, who gives light to those lost in dark days—and these days are dark—guiding our feet in the way of peace. Zechariah’s blessing is a foundation that will enable John to step out into the world to fulfill his destiny.

It's no small thing to be entrusted to God. It's no small thing to build a life upon the faithfulness and trust of God. Like Zechariah, we are being asked to trust and lean upon and into the seemingly impossible yet true. It's a matter of being receptive. Advent is a season of receptivity, when we are asked to receive, even surrender to the work of God in the church and the world, when we yield to the ground of our lives. And we can trust the ground under our feet, the Ground who is God, the foundation of our hope.



Fra Angelico (1387-1455), "The Naming of John the Baptist," Museo de San Marco, Florence

¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994). For a theological reading of Erikson's stages see James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Jossey-Bass, 1998).

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 322.