

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

6th Sunday of Easter
Year A

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May 21, 2017

Text: Luke 1:5-25

Title: “Emerge: Claiming New Possibilities—Sharing the Story of the Midwest Mission Distribution Center”

Through the years in the church some people have said to me they don't have the gifts necessary for this ministry or that ministry or that they haven't felt worthy. One woman was pondering joining a Volunteers-in-Mission trip to Slidell, Louisiana to do some Hurricane Katrina relief work. Betty, a woman in her late 60's, said to me, “I really don't have any skills. I don't know what I could do.” I told her God can use what little we have for great good. “Just come.” I told her, “I guarantee you will not regret it, that you will discover God can use you more than you realize.” She came. And I have a great photograph of her with a crowbar in her hand ripping off some old wood trim on a bedroom wall of a home we were helping repair for a disabled veteran whose home was flooded halfway up the walls during Katrina. Actually, I teased her about being a thorn in my side because she became so passionate about being there and doing this that she became a slave driver that week, pushing us to get things. God can use what little we have and use it for great good.

One of the beautiful characteristics of God is that God can surprise us and use us in ways we might never have imagined. Listen to the story of Zechariah and the surprising way in which God used him and his wife, Elizabeth:

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. 8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him

John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” 18 Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” 19 The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 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.” 21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” 61 They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

God did a new thing in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were both adherents to the faith tradition tracing its roots back to Abraham and Sarah neither of whom believed God either when God told them they would have a son and that his name would be Isaac. The Lord can and does call us to experiences we may not believe will happen or can happen, and yet God continues to call us and use us in ways we might never imagine. The gift is that God is involved in loving action, changing the world for the good of the world whether the world likes it or not, whether we believe it or not. This son born to Zechariah and Elizabeth came to prepare the way for the One whose resurrection means, in the words of the hymn, “This is a Day of New Beginnings”

Christ is alive and goes before us
To show and share what love can do

This a day of new beginnings
Our God is making all things new.

I believe this with all my heart and every time I'm privileged to share in an experience in which people are serving with a heart for mission, it is confirmed. Over and over again I have found that the Spirit of the Living and Loving Christ is present whenever two or three gather together and serve together in ways that seek to express God's profound love for the world and all the people in it.

This trip to the Midwest Mission Distribution Center was no exception. I'd like to invite any of the participants in this Volunteers in Mission trip to come forward now and once they have been introduced, 4 of them will share something of their experience. Not all of them are from here and some have graciously made the trip this morning to be with us in worship so please introduce yourself after worship and spend some time hearing about their experiences.

Introductions by Becky Jenkins

April Nahgahwon, Dawn Krawscak, Becky Jenkins, Sheila Berner shared their experiences.

I somehow gravitated to the sewing machine shop, in part because Earl and I were the only males in the group and so I think we felt this innate drive to join forces. But I also enjoy using tools and repairing machines and keep them out of the landfills as long as possible especially as in this case the repaired machine provides a tool that people can use to support themselves and their families.

The center receives donations of used machines people no longer want or need. As you'll note in the photos, some of them are antiques and are mechanically operated with a foot pedal or treadle as they are called. These machines are refurbished in the repair shop and sent to areas of countries in which electricity either doesn't exist or is not reliable. We were told the story of one woman in the Philippines who received one of these refurbished antiques and she told someone that it saved her life and that of her families because she had just lost her husband who was their sole means of support. She did not know how she was going to provide for her family or herself, but the sewing machine gave her the means to start a small sewing business so she could support her family and it also allowed her to make their clothing. It saved not only her life but also her children.

So this particular ministry is not just feeding people but it's providing them with the means to feed themselves.

We've been spending time with this ancient image of the cocoon or the chrysalis as we've been educated is actually what butterflies emerge from. Whether cocoon or Chrysalis, what appears to be a dead thing is actually very much alive. It actually is a place out of which beauty and new life comes.

So it is with the church. There are so many voices out there proclaiming the demise of the church and—in particular--the decline of the mainliners. Well, some of that may be so. It's hard to debate the numbers, but I'll debate the spirit of the people with anyone. The church is not dead and will never be dead when there are people like we've heard from today who continue to find meaning and purpose and love by serving that others may live. The church may change and transform but as long as the living Christ continues to move when two or three are

gathered together in Christ's name, as long as such serving people continue expressing God's love for those they don't even know and some they do, the church is not dead. As Zechariah and Elizabeth—and Abraham and Sarah before them—discovered, God is capable of bringing life out of that which appears--as the Apostle Paul famously wrote of Abraham—"as good as dead." The invitation and sometimes the challenge is whether or not we believe it. The invitation and the challenge is to decide whether or not we will respond when God calls us to serve out of love for God and for neighbor.