

Compelling characters: Zechariah's story

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

I'm not the only preacher who wonders occasionally about the logic of the Sunday lectionary readings. Why is this text included but not that one? I usually conclude that someone wiser than I is choosing these texts and that the logic of it will be revealed to me if I stay with the texts long enough. I remember the words of my New Testament professor, Markus Barth: "If you can't find the Word in the text, it's your fault, not the text's. Go back and read it again."

In Advent I struggle not so much with what's there—all those scary apocalyptic texts—as with what's not. What about Simeon and Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth? We read about the annunciation one year out of three, but the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple and Simeon's and Anna's response to him never make it into the Sunday readings. I'm grateful that my own tradition commends but does not prescribe use of the lectionary. In fact, the practice of John Calvin, whose 500th birthday we've been celebrating this year, was to preach straight through book after book (a plan, I confess, that I have not adopted).

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna are compelling characters. They say, or Luke puts in their mouths, some of the most beautiful prose in the Bible. For example, Zechariah's Benedictus: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people Israel. . . . By the tender mercy of God the dawn from on high will break upon us"; Elizabeth's greeting to Mary, enshrined in Roman Catholic piety: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb"; and Simeon's Nunc Dimittis, said as he holds the infant Jesus in his arms: "Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation."

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna are old people. Could it be that, in excluding them, lectionary makers are guilty of ageism? Luke delicately describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as "getting on in years." Could it be that I am attracted to them because that phrase fits me?

Perhaps I am fond of Zechariah because he experiences the ultimate clergy nightmare. Clergy tend to have nightmares about showing up in the pulpit without a

sermon, or about getting caught on Sunday morning still in pajamas and bathrobe. Zechariah, a priest all his life, finally had the opportunity to serve in the temple in Jerusalem. He was chosen for a special duty, which involved lighting the incense in the sanctuary. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. But when the moment came he couldn't talk; he was a preacher with no voice.

And I love Zechariah's story because the angel Gabriel made him mute for nine months for doubting that his wife would conceive a child. A friend and colleague once observed the latent feminism in this text: a man who presumes to speak about a woman's pregnancy is silenced by God.

I think about Zechariah not only in Advent but at every baptism, for every child is a sign of God's blessing and favor, and every newborn is a sign of God's promise.