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Transformed By Faith

Luke 1:68

One of the highlights of my trip to Scotland last summer was a visit to Grassmarket Square in Edinburgh. This particular square was for many centuries a place of execution. A monument has been placed there to commemorate several hundred Scots who were executed in this place for participating in a struggle for religious freedom during the second half of the 17th century. They resisted the Stuart kings who believed they had the divine right to regulate the worship of the people. These kings, Charles I, Charles II, and James II, claimed to be appointed by God to be mediators of God's truth to the people. The resisters came to be called Covenanters because they adhered to the National Covenant of Scotland which called on the King to recognize that Christ alone is head of the church.

The power of the Covenanters came from what they experienced in worship. Through the singing of the Psalms, the reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Lord's Supper they believed themselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. They did not need a priest to stand between them and God. They did not need a king or a bishop to tell them what liturgy to use. Their faith was planted in their hearts. When their churches were closed down or taken away from them they found secluded outdoor locations for the worship of God. Some of these secret gatherings were small; others attracted thousands of worshipers. When kings initiated the reign of terror called the "killing times," the Covenanters demonstrated time and again that they were willing to suffer and die for their faith. Some were imprisoned. Some were shipped to America to work on plantations as slaves. Some fled to Ireland when their homes and crops were burned by soldiers. Some were taken to Edinburgh and executed at the Grassmarket Square.

I was standing in the square reading the monument when a Scottish man joined me there. He took a few minutes to read it and then he said, "We would be so much better off if religion had never been invented." If he expected me to agree with him he was disappointed. When I started to say something positive about religion he quickly flitted away. The presence of that monument was clearly troubling to a man who apparently had no faith. What was he to make of people who were willing to die for their faith? But nonbelievers are not the only ones who struggle to make sense of what happened in the Grassmarket Square. Those of us who take our faith seriously can also be hard-pressed to understand the passion of those who were willing to pay such a price.

Luke describes this kind of struggle as it played out in the heart of a man named Zechariah. Zechariah had spent a lifetime serving God as a priest. He was most likely a man of discipline rather than passion. His life had followed a very predictable pattern except for his disappointment that he and his wife Elizabeth had been unable to have children. Now they are too old. But one day everything suddenly changes. It happens during worship. Once a year a priest is chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord where no one is permitted to go. The presence of God in the sanctuary was considered to be so strong that an ordinary person could not survive there. The priest goes there to represent the people. He becomes a mediator between the people and God. Sometimes a rope would be tied around the leg of the priest chosen to perform this function. If he is struck dead for his sins they can use the rope to pull his body out without putting anyone else at risk.

Zechariah understands that worship can be dangerous, but he is not prepared for what happens on this occasion. An angel appears to announce the birth of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Then the angel goes on to explain the role this son will play. God is preparing to do something different. Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, will prepare people to receive God into their lives. The old priestly system in which Zechariah has functioned will be taken down. The people will no longer need a priest to stand between them and God. The temple and its sanctuary, its "holy of holies," will be obsolete.

The announcement to Zechariah of this most unlikely birth has some similarity to the birth announcement to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. You will remember that they were also too old to become parents. They responded with laughter. It was all too preposterous for them to take in. But Zechariah does not respond like that. He has a theological education and understands the disturbing implications of what the angel is saying. He is not prepared to give up the old world and the priestly role that has defined his existence. He wants nothing to do with a new world in which God's Spirit transforms people through their participation in worship. He cannot imagine a world in which the priest no longer occupies an elevated position. Luke tells us that Zechariah did not believe the angel. He may well have had doubts about the biological possibilities of the angel's announcement. But he was even more likely to object to the theological significance of what the angel had to say. This was one angel he did not want to believe.

The worshipers that day understood that Zechariah had been gone too long. They may have feared the worst. When the priest reappeared they knew something had happened to him because he could not speak. Now that's a problem I can understand. In recent years when I get a cold it often goes to my voice. I live in fear of getting a cold and being unable to do my job on Sunday. As David Anderson will learn, my colleagues live in fear of getting a Saturday night phone call from my wife. If I can't call it means my voice is gone and someone else will have to preach. But Zechariah's problem was far more serious. For nine months he could not speak. While his wife Elizabeth was pregnant he was on a forced sabbatical. Unable to do his ministry he has no choice but to meditate on the angel's message concerning what God is doing in the world. When the day comes for the baby to be circumcised Zechariah regains his voice. The Spirit has come to him and he is filled with a joyous and exuberant faith. He offers a song celebrating the redemption God brings to the people. He is now a man of deep passion who welcomes the new world the angel announced.

Zechariah's song demonstrates the kind of passion that motivated the Scottish Covenanters and enabled them to eventually overcome their powerful enemies. They understood that the God who had redeemed them had also set them free to serve his kingdom of grace. The Spirit of God they experienced in worship taught them that they need not fear the wrath of any earthly king.

Several years ago the British Broadcasting Corporation produced a documentary on the Scottish Covenanters. The response I would like to have given to the Scot I met at Grassmarket Square is contained in the closing words of that documentary.

In an age that is skeptical of religious claims, it is hard to understand the passion of the Covenanters. They were a people for whom the meaning of life was obedience to God...But they were also willing to challenge the arrogance of royal power...and in breaking that power, they helped to bring in the modern age. And, in that sense, we can say it was their blood that bought our freedom (*The Sword and the Cross: Four Turbulent Episodes in the History of Christian Scotland*, British Broadcasting Corporation Scotland, page 92).