

Listen to the Silence

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016]

I

The story of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the birth of John the Baptist is seldom read during the Advent season.

We are used to hearing about...

the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary,
the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem,
the birth of Jesus in a lowly stable,
the angelic announcement to the shepherds,
the visits of the shepherds and the
wise men to the baby.

Seldom do preachers preach on the first birth story that greets us in Luke's gospel.

Luke finds many parallels between the births of John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus.

An angel announces the birth of both boys to one of the parents,
who first are frightened
but then come to believe.

Both births contain an element of the miraculous—
as John is born to elderly parents,
and Jesus is born to a young virgin.

As adults the ministries of John and Jesus intersect at the banks of the Jordan River, where Jesus is baptized by John.

John precedes Jesus in death; both are executed under trumped-up charges.

For these reasons and many others Luke begins the story of the birth of Jesus with the story of John's birth.

And that story begins with Zechariah in the temple, and tells how this priest of Israel was left in complete silence for 9 months.

II

Zechariah was a member of the Jewish priesthood—
one of 20,000 “lower priests.”

Twice a year a group of about 800 would come to serve for a week at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Only one of the 800 was chosen to enter the Holy of Holies during the hour of prayer.

Our story begins on the day when Zechariah's number comes up—
it is his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be the priest to burn the daily incense in the Temple,
lifting the peoples' prayers to God.

I have no idea what Zechariah was thinking
or what he was expecting that day.

But if he is anything like most of the priests and preachers I have known,
including the one I know best,
it was with a mix of emotions—

- anticipation, a touch of stage fright, and yes, a bit of ego thrown in;
- perhaps weighed down with the concerns of the Temple—
budgets,
staffing,
differences of opinion;
- maybe worried more about whether his **stole** was right
than he was about whether his **soul** was right;
- full of faith and full of doubt, all at the same time,
there to carry out this ancient ritual, repeated daily,

and for, perhaps, this one and only time in his ministry.

And if the crowd was like most of the congregations I have known, their presence and prayers are filled with just about as much of a mix of...

faith and fear,
 confidence and cowardice,
 hope and hunger,
 dedication and despair,
 holiness and hollowness,
 sinfulness and saintliness...

because when we are really honest,
 that's how we all come to worship, isn't it?

And that's how we all come to this season of Advent—
 with all of our petty and pious reasons for it,
 all the emotions of joy, fear, anger, and sorrow mingled in a moment.

It turns out to be a more unusual experience than Zechariah or anyone else could have imagined.

The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah—
 standing at the right side of the altar where the incense is burned.

The encounter takes Zechariah completely by surprise.

(Sometimes it is the clergy who are most surprised when God actually shows up in the service of worship!)

Zechariah is paralyzed with fear, but the angel has a message from God—

“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.” (1:13)

This is unbelievable news...
 so much so that Zechariah has a hard time accepting it.

“How can I know that this is so?” he says, “For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

(Zechariah is also a wise man: his wife is not “old,” but “getting on in years.”)

Gabriel answers Zechariah’s question by saying that basically it is “because I am an angel, and because God sent me to tell you this message.”

“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.” (1:20)

Now the people outside the Temple—
waiting for the priest to come out and bless them—
are growing restless.

“What’s keeping him?” they wonder.

When at last Zechariah emerges, he is unable to speak to them.

They realize that he has seen a vision.

Zechariah finished his term of service and returned home,
but he “remained unable to speak.”

III

Now let us skip ahead 9 months and 32 verses to the time of the baby’s birth.

It seems that Elizabeth had secluded herself at home during the pregnancy,
and that Zechariah himself had little contact with other people
(he would not have been much of a conversationalist!).

When the baby is born the neighbors and kinfolk all come in surprise and great joy.

They gather on the eighth day,
which is the day for the baby to be circumcised and given a name.

From what we know of first century Judaism, sons were often named for a grandfather, and sometimes for the father.

Usually the father would name the child,

and in the act of naming claim the child as his own.

But with Zechariah unable to speak,
the crowd turns to Elizabeth to hear the name.

“Oh, we don’t even have to ask her, because, of course, his name will be Zechariah...After all, the two aren’t likely to have any more children, so they’ll want to name him after his father.”

But to the surprise of everyone, Elizabeth said,
“No! His name is John.”

The relatives and neighbors are stunned.

“Oh, my...this has all been too much for a woman her age...”

“What got stirred into her Geritol to make them think they needed a baby? ...

“How will they ever manage on his pension? ...

“God knows, Medicare doesn’t cover obstetrics!”

So they say,

“Now, Honey...you don’t have any relatives named John...Let’s just ask Zechariah what he thinks...Oh...well, how do we ask him? Does anybody here know sign language for ‘name that baby?’”

IV

And that brings us to the one detail in the Zechariah story that is easily overlooked.

Verse 62 says, *“Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.”*

Now it’s obvious that Zechariah couldn’t speak,
because to answer the question,
he asks for something to write on.

Zechariah then wrote out the answer: *“His name is John.”*

But have you ever noticed the other detail of the story?

The New Jerusalem Bible translation of verse 62 reads this way:

They “made signs to his father to find out what he wanted him called.”

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* phrases it this way:

“They used sign language to ask Zachariah what he wanted him named.”

Why would they have to use sign language?

Does it mean that not only was Zechariah unable to speak,
but that he was also unable to hear?

Could it be the Zechariah was both deaf and mute?

Confirmation of this comes from verse 22, which says that Zechariah
“remained unable to speak.”

The Greek word used here is *kophos*. It has three meanings:

1. Deaf; 2. Mute; or 3. Deaf and mute.

This entire chapter only makes sense if Zechariah was made both mute and deaf.

Besides the New Jerusalem Bible, only one other translator seems to capture the essence of Zechariah’s condition.

J.B. Phillips’ version puts Gabriel’s words in verse 20 this way:

“Because you do not believe what I have said, you shall live in silence, and you shall be unable to speak a word until the day it happens.”

V

You shall live in silence.

This is what we have in the story of Zechariah—
a man who lives for nine months in total silence.

Can you imagine that...even a little?

No TV...no radio...no I-Pod or MP3.

No birds singing...no wind howling...no dogs barking.

No music...no conversation...no sermon (forget I said that!).

Several times I've been to the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky and tried to spend five days in complete silence.

This is not an easy thing for a preacher to do!

I'm sure it wouldn't be easy for most of you, either!

Zechariah is made both mute and deaf,
and it doesn't seem fair.

It's his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to give the priestly benediction to the crowd of worshipers at the Temple.

It's his one-time encounter with an angel.

It's the only time his wife will be pregnant.

And Zechariah can't tell anyone about it!

Why does God make Zechariah endure nine months of silence?

Why does God take away his speech and hearing at the most important moment of his life?

What a cruel sense of humor God seems to have.

Almost every commentator on Luke notes that the silence is punishment for Zechariah's disbelief.

I disagree. I think the noise we put up with on a daily basis is punishment.

Silence is a gift...
 an opportunity...
 a place where miracles happen.

Perhaps that explains why we avoid silence...
 and why we so desperately need it.

There is a deep spiritual truth here...**if we can hear it.**

At no time of the year are we more surrounded by noise than at this season of the year.

At no time of the year are we more in need of time and space to listen to the silence than at this season of the year.

For the silence speaks a language that cannot be heard in the haste of life
 and in the rush to get ready for Christmas.

Henri Nouwen once said, "Silence, it prepares us to speak. You ought not to talk until you have been silent."

There is a difference between having to say something,
 and having something to say.

So Nouwen says only those who have spent quality time in silence can speak with authenticity and passion.

And silence leads to a sanctuary of the Spirit where God speaks to us in words and images that are sharp and clear.

Remember how Phillips Brooks put it in that great Christmas hymn:

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
 No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,*

Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

VI

When Zechariah finally gets out of nine months of silence and has the chance to speak again, he has something to say.

He sings a song of praise to God, known as the *Benedictus*.

*Blessed be the God of Israel,
Who comes to set us free,
Who visits and redeems us,
And grants us liberty.
The prophets spoke of mercy
Of freedom and release;
God shall fulfill the promise
To bring our people peace.*

**The Lord is in his Holy Temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him!**

During this Advent season, I invite you...
to find some space,
take some time,
to listen...
listen...
listen to the silence.

Amen.

Sources:

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