

Zechariah

Third in the Advent Annunciations Series

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Luke 1:5-25

⁵In 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.

⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified;

and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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.”

¹⁸Zechariah 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.” ¹⁹The 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. ²⁰But 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.”

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When 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. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. ²⁴After 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.”

Biblical scholars tell us to think of the four gospel writers as different preachers, each with his own theological interpretation, and each preaching to a different congregation in a distinctive place. So it is no surprise that each of the Gospels has its own unique way of introducing the story of Jesus which will unfold in the pages that follow. The Gospel writer Mark makes no mention of birth stories, but launches in with a grown up Jesus going down to the river to be baptized by John. Matthew sounds like he consulted Ancestry.com before spending the first seventeen verses tracing Jesus' lineage back to Father Abraham. John, of course, begins with a choral introit premiering an early Christian hymn along the lines of "Of the Father's Love Begotten." And today, we see how Luke does a most unusual thing. Luke gives more gospel real estate to the birth of John the Baptist than to the subsequent birth of Jesus – by a whopping thirty more verses!

In a more typical year, in a customary Advent season, we would likely leap over Zechariah, and ignore him altogether, in our haste to get to Gabriel's annunciation to Mary and the birth of Jesus. Usually, he's only in the distant background as the elderly husband of Mary's cousin Elizabeth while the two of them get together to talk about *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. However, this is not a usual year, nor a typical Advent season, and I believe Gabriel's Annunciation to Zechariah has good news for us during this uncommon pandemic – when we, like him so desperately need some good news.

Some of you may have seen the news this week about yet another scarcity brought on by the pandemic. First it was toilet paper, then it was meat. Now – what is hard to find is antacids. "Queasy Americans, fighting upset stomachs and worries about the pandemic have stocked up on over-the-counter medications, making them scarce in some parts of the country," the article reads. Two weeks ago the grocer Wegmans started limiting how many antacid medications you can buy. The reason, of course? Americans are unduly stressed. ¹

¹ Julie Creswell, *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 2020.

The election season has taken its toll on us, and we are worried about the rising coronavirus cases; worried about our jobs, worried about remote learning being sub-par, and even going to the grocery store feels fraught and unsafe again. Add to all of that the usual holiday stress compounded by navigating Christmas without extended family, without friends, without parties and shared good cheer. Mix in anxiety and scarcity, and Lo, and Behold, there is a run on upset stomach medication.

Now, we have no indication that Zechariah was in search of Pepcid or Tums, when Gabriel showed up but you can bet he was stressed. Summed up in verse seven, we are told he and Elizabeth had no children, she was barren and they were getting on in years. As one commentary puts it, “Translated, this means: triple whammy, dead end.” Like Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah before them, their barrenness is about more than not having children. In their world it felt like they had no future. No one to carry on the family name, no one to care for them in their old age, but even more than that no one to receive what had been handed down to them – which was a righteous, trusting relationship with the living God.

In case you missed it, we are told that both Zechariah and Elizabeth are heirs to a long line of the priestly tradition, going all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses. The text is telling us that the future of faith itself is at stake! For them – this is not a one-off year when there will be no singing of Christmas carols in the sanctuary. Their situation looks down a pathway wondering if anyone will ever go to seminary again and be prepared to lead the people of God in worship, be able to quote Isaiah by heart, be ready to point people to the living, life-giving, promise-making God upon whom they had staked their lives, not to mention their vocation. Which is precisely why Luke goes into such great lengths to tell their story, as eager as we might be to get to the main event in Bethlehem. Zechariah stands tall in the first chapter of Luke to remind us that God has been setting the stage for the birth of Jesus for a very long time. If you know anything about Abraham and

Sarah's story back in Genesis, or Hannah's moment between the generations of Judges and Kings then you recognize that Zechariah and Elizabeth are serving as a bridge from the Old to the New, from the chosen people of ancient Israel to all the families of the earth.

So.... what does God give to Zechariah to help us understand exactly what is happening here? Silence. Gabriel does not show up with a sermon in hand and ask Zechariah to preach it, no prophecy yet to proclaim, not even a prayer for the congregation waiting outside. But silence.

Today we find Zechariah has drawn the lot, which, by chance, puts him in the Holy of Holies.



He is alone in the inner chamber of the Temple with the special job of burning incense on the altar while the people outside are praying.

This William Blake painting from the Metropolitan Museum of Art renders the luminous Menorah and resplendent garments of the priest to show the sacred setting of the moment. Incense rises around and above the altar where we can see a burning presence of the divine. The angel messenger Gabriel appears to glow. Look at how their eyes meet. The characters are painted in a swirl of dreamy pastel colors yet we focus on their dark eyes fixed upon each other. Gabriel points to the heavens; and we are told Zechariah is overwhelmed with fear. Gabriel delivers the unexpected, and frankly, unbelievable news. In their old age their prayers will be answered, they will have a child and name him John.

They will be filled with joy and gladness because their child will be filled with the Holy Spirit and turn many people to the Lord their God. You see, this is not just about having a baby; once again it is about all the people of God having a future, a hope-filled, joyful future in the steady companionship of a wonder-making God. When Zechariah does – what anyone of us would do under the circumstances, and begins to ask for the details – what, where, how, when? Gabriel gives him the gift of silence. It is as if Gabriel says to him: This time, dear preacher, prophet and priest, you do not have to explain it. Just wait. Enjoy the silence.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that some scholars say Gabriel’s rendering Zechariah mute is a punishment for his disbelief, for his initial hesitant questions. But I agree with Taylor who writes instead, “It seems entirely possible to me that his silence was the angel’s gift to him – an enforced sabbatical, a gestation period of his own during which the seeds of hope were sown again in his hushed soul. He could not learn anything with his mouth open. Nothing he could say held a candle to what was happening right in front of him, and his muteness turned out to be the wilderness in which his dream was born.”²

This year Christmas will be more silent than any of us would want.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, p. 93-94.

We cannot be crammed shoulder to shoulder in this sanctuary singing our favorite carols together, passing the light of Christ from candle to candle until the whole room is aglow. Christmas will be more still this year, more quiet. So let us be grateful for Zechariah's silence which reminds us that the silence can be a gift. Indeed, it is a gift. Into our current wilderness a dream is gestating, a holy seed is taking root and we would do well to make more room for sacred silence.

Remember the Prophet Habakkuk's most famous invitation: *The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.* Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, points again that the holy temple of the Lord which will become Mary's womb; where God is choosing to dwell anew – no longer behind the heavy curtains of the Holy of Holies, but in the flesh and blood of humankind, in the joy and suffering we endure wherever we are. This year, of all years, we would do well to press the mute button for a while and allow ourselves to sit in silence.

Mute the news,
Mute the chaos,
Mute our own voices even – and just be quiet.

Be silent like the stars.
Silent in awe and wonder.
Silent in waiting.

Silent like the old priest Zechariah
who was given the time and the space
to reflect upon the promise:
You will have joy and gladness.

His promise is our promise also.
We will have joy and gladness.

AMEN.