

Between Silence and Song

First Sunday in Advent

Text: Luke 1: 5-20; 57-63; 67 -80

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Advent is with us once again and, as always, begins with curious story. It came to pass just as I tell you to an elder couple in their closing years. He was Zechariah, she Elizabeth, and well, they were people pretty much like us.

Zechariah was a priest in the tradition of Abijah. In those days priests often juggled a bi-vocational life needing to have more than one job. So it was with Zechariah. He was a shepherd in the hill country most of the time. But every now and again he got the word to make his way to Jerusalem to serve at the altar in the Temple.

That's how he happened to be in the Holy City as the first Advent began. And literally, by luck of the draw, in accordance with the order of the priesthood, he was the one selected to enter the sanctuary and offer incense on that very particular day.

Just as he was doing so, by mystery of Spirit, an angel happened by. And in whatever form of apparition we might conjure the angel, Gabriel, interrupted the ritual the moment with something far more stunningly spiritual.

With scarce a pause Gabriel began to tell the elder priest some pretty astonishing things. For one, that he and Elizabeth would become parents. Shock filled the old man as this was way beyond the bucket. They had prayed for a child for years. But now? And how? He and his beloved were no longer in the childbearing chapter of life.

Still, Gabriel told him more. Their child would become a significant player in the greatest story ever told. "You will call him John," Gabriel announced. "He will turn the hearts of people and will prepare the way for the Messiah of the Lord."

At this point Zechariah was overwhelmed with fear. And, just as true then as now, fear can spill out in unexpected and unbidden ways. In his case it came out as adversarial disbelief. He became resistant, argumentative and oppositional.

But apparently, Gabriel expected compliance and more tempered wisdom from a priestly soul. The angel did not appreciate the contentious push back or the tone of the conversation. And so Gabriel imposed a consequence on the servant in the Temple, and struck him dumb, rendering him completely speechless.

But come to pass, counter-intuitively perhaps, befuddled and baffling, the imposed silence had a double-edge to it. It transformed the old man. And oddly, through a sentence of involuntary quiet, something began to grow deep within Zechariah's heart.

Let's stop for a moment. What if our Advent became a time to turn down the volume of our chatter-filled lives? What if we allowed the power of silence to take hold, and stopped the velocity of our minds in favor of listening with the ears of our hearts?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote:¹ "None of us lives a life so rushed that it is impossible for us to find even ten minutes a day, in the morning or evening, when we can let everything around us become quiet; when we can submit ourselves completely to eternity; when we can let it speak to us and ask about it ourselves."

Do you think? Is this what was happening to Zechariah? Even more: could it be his signal to us as Advent comes again? Might we have here an invitation buried in an old narrative to something more eternal than the distractions of the culture around us?

Back to the story because it gets richer yet. After something like 40 weeks of being with child Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist. In parallel, after 280 days of gestating silence, Zechariah got his voice back, just as promised.

On the eighth day as the baby was presented in the Temple, according to custom, Zechariah was asked for a name. He still could not speak and so he wrote it down: "His name is John." And in that moment, his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak. His old familiar sound was back, so much wiser now.

More: he was no longer filled with fear – which might tell us about how much value added silence can be to the human heart. And though he was not the one who gave birth, something deep in him was struggling to be born just as surely.

In fact, Zechariah broke into a song! And his words came to form one of the very early Advent Carols – second only to Mary's *Magnificat*. History has come to call it the Benedictus – so called for the first two words he spoke: "Blessed be!"

Still half speaking, and singing too, this father of John burst forth: "And you, my child, will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give knowledge of salvation and forgiveness by the tender mercy of God; to offer light to those who sit in darkness, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Though I do not know if it happened exactly as I have told you, this story is true in the varied and mysterious ways that truth comes to us. Zechariah's heart, soul, mind and strength moved from stunned silence all the way to an amazing song.

And so my friends: here, today, in the place of our lives, can we so much as dare the thought? Can we be silent enough to hear within our own burning hearts the divinity waiting to be born?

And when the silence ends, and the quiet lifts, and the star marks the sky, and the manger is full, what might be the words of our song? Because quite honestly the truth of Zechariah's story is our truth, too. We also live somewhere between silence and song. And the spiritual invitation of that movement belongs to us all.

May we wonder, each and all, as the Table of Advent feeds and calls us to life, once again; and as the candles and stories and the carols begin their long-awaited pull toward Christmas. Amen.

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¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Wonder of Wonders*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2015, p. 12.