

# “Zechariah’s Song”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 22, 2019*

Rev. John Wahl

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

In the final verses of the Jewish Scriptures – we call it the Old Testament – the prophet Malachi announces to the people that in due time, “the sun of righteousness will rise.” In other words, the long-awaited Messiah, the promised One of God, would come. By the time the New Testament begins, here in the first chapter of Luke, several hundred years have passed since any prophet had uttered words from God. And yet, the Jewish people were still faithfully offering sacrifices to the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem.

On this particular day, Zechariah was chosen by the casting of lots – meant to determine God’s will – to enter the Temple and offer an incense offering to God. This would have been a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Zechariah; a priest from the hill country visiting Jerusalem on a rotation. Though he was an old man, he had never been in the inner sanctum before. His wife, Elizabeth, also along in years, was barren – meaning that they had no children.

While the other priests were waiting for Zechariah to come back out, the angel Gabriel appears to him, telling him not to be afraid, and promising him that he and his wife would have a son to be named John, who will be the one to make ready God’s people, preparing them for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

In fear and disbelief, Zechariah says to the angel, “How will I know that this is so?” He is looking for a sign, a promise that this thing they have prayed and waited for so long to happen will really take place. But, this question results in Zechariah being rendered completely mute until the time when these things will be fulfilled: nine months of total silence.

From the very beginning Luke’s gospel, we are reminded of earlier times; specifically the beginning of God’s relationship with the people of Israel. For, like Abraham and Sarah before him – who were also very old when it is revealed to them that they will have a child – Zechariah is skeptical when he hears the promise of a son to be born. And like Hannah, who also was thought to be barren before giving birth to Samuel, the child is set apart as someone special: no strong drink will enter his body so that he can instead be filled with the Holy Spirit. And like the prophet Elijah,

who carries a message of repentance, John will be a herald to the people in the wilderness.

The priests who awaited Zechariah outside of the Temple believed he and Elizabeth, because they did not have children, had been cursed by God. But despite outward appearances to the contrary, they had been chosen by God to bring into the world a child that would announce the coming of the Messiah. When Zechariah returned home, unable to speak, Elizabeth became pregnant and believed in her heart that the Lord had looked favorably on them.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, her neighbors – who, like the Temple priests, assumed that she was cursed by God – now rejoiced with her. On the eighth day, when it was time for the baby to be circumcised, they all expected that he would be named Zechariah – after his father – but Elizabeth said instead that the boy's name should be John: which means, the Lord has looked favorably. When asked to confirm the choice, Zechariah wrote on a table that yes, his name was to be John. And at that very moment, his ability to speak returned.

This whole episode amazed the people who witnessed it. They could not figure out how Zechariah and Elizabeth – this unlikely set of new parents – could have come up with the same name. And while Zechariah had been directed by the angel, he must have wondered how his wife – to whom he had not been able to speak – also knew the name. Everyone wondered what would become of the special child: this favored one of God.

What kind of song would you sing if you had been rendered silent for nine months? How miserable would it have been to want to offer comforting words to a discomfited wife, but to be unable? What frustration might you feel if you had the divine experience of an encounter with an angel, and yet could not share it with anyone? What kind of restlessness would that cause?<sup>1</sup>

But Zechariah's song is not one of bitterness and regret, but of thanksgiving and hope. Indeed, his words at the close of this first chapter of Luke represent the return of prophecy after many centuries of silence. Zechariah recognizes that in the birth of his son John, God has looked with favor not only upon him and his wife, but upon the whole people of Israel; they fulfill the promises made long ago to their ancestors. God is raising up a Savior for his people and John will go before this Savior to prepare the way: "to give knowledge of salvation to God's people."

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<sup>1</sup> John Dobbs, "Zechariah's Song"

Thus, we learn that the good news of the gospel – that God is coming among his people in the form of this long-awaited Savior – is going to be nurtured in the wilderness. It will not appear within the Temple, or among the religious leaders, but out with the people; giving light to those who are walking in darkness. As the scriptures remind us over and over, God appears in the unexpected places; through the words of unlikely messengers. The birth of Jesus – the story which is told in the second chapter of Luke – is another example of this: a common young woman, Mary, is also visited by an angel and given the chance to be a vessel of God’s coming to earth. She will give birth outside, in a stable, among lowly animals and shepherds.

In the verses we skipped over today, these two unlikely mothers: Elizabeth – advanced in years, having likely given up hope that she would bear a child; and Mary – an unwed young girl, likely not even considering being a mother; these two women meet while they are both pregnant. Thus, John and Jesus encounter each other even before they are born; previewing a relationship that would lead to the preparation for and fulfillment of the return of God’s prophecy and the people’s long-awaited Savior. Decades after their expectant mothers meet, these two sons would meet again in the wilderness, where John baptizes Jesus and his ministry begins.

There are times in our lives, and in our life together as God’s people, when it can be difficult to see a way forward; when it seems as though all hope for the future has reached a dead end. Elizabeth’s barrenness – her inability to have a child – was seen as a curse upon her and her husband, God’s judgement upon them for something they must have done wrong. Their situation served as a microcosm of where the people of Israel found themselves. God’s prophecy had gone silent; surely, they thought, this must mean that they had done something to anger God. Though they continued to worship God, offering sacrifices in the Temple and longing for the Messiah’s coming, it must have seemed as though hope for a different future had reached a dead end.<sup>2</sup>

But in the Bible, we often encounter a God for whom there are no dead ends – detours, perhaps; long periods of waiting – but no dead ends. In this Advent season, we look for God to come once again in an unlikely manner: something akin to the births of sons to an old woman or a young virgin. Against all odds, we look for God to make the way possible for the birth of new life in the barren places of our lives, our community, and our world. This is the good news that we seek to share this Christmas season: that God works in unexpected ways, employing unlikely people as his messengers and agents of hope.

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

As this story of Zechariah and Elizabeth reminds us, when seemingly bad things happen, it does not necessarily mean that those who endure them are bad people. The conventional wisdom was that God had not granted them children for a reason. But long after they might have stopped praying for children themselves, God remembered their prayers and – through the appearance of an angel to Zechariah – announced that after long waiting, those prayers would be answered. And whether it was deserved or not, Zechariah’s long silence resulted not in bitterness, but thanksgiving.

Sometimes, it is only in the silence that God can be heard speaking. It is only after long periods of waiting that we will see God acting. And so, Advent reminds us that there is value in the waiting; that despite detours and delays, hope in God does not come to a dead end. God’s love for us is so strong, so complete, that he would offer us his only child – the rising sun of righteousness – to live among us, and with us, and in us.

Friends, this time of waiting will not go on forever. In just a couple more days, people will gather for Christmas Eve worship services, lighting candles and singing “Silent Night.” As God’s promises have been kept in days past, so we can trust even now that God is at work among us and that the season of peace on earth will dawn. Like Zechariah, we desire to see a sign that this will come to pass: a sign like the birth of child, given for us and all people. Amen.