

Preparing the Way...of Peace

Luke 1:68-79

CWZepp, BWCOB, December 9, 2018

I have never seen a nativity scene that included the character of Zechariah. Which is a real shame, since he is by far my favorite Christmas character...the one person in the story with whom I can really relate, and not just because he has a name that begins with a “Z,” which I will readily confess was my initial draw to him as a child.

Now perhaps some of you will object to the idea that Zechariah is even really a character in the Christmas story at all – at least in the technical sense. Sure he is a relative of Jesus, but so are Ruth and David and any number of other Biblical characters – none of whom I would argue should occupy a place in the nativity. And perhaps if you really push me, I wouldn’t truly want to include Zechariah among the shepherds and magi and animals and all that. (Where would he stand?!? And if you include him, you would need to include Elizabeth and John and who knows how many others...) But I am resolute in my opinion that Zechariah is an often overlooked but significant character in the story of the incarnation.

As I say these things, I am aware that there are probably many of you sitting here listening to me wondering who Zechariah even is and why in the world I am yammering on about him . Which only illustrates my point. In brief Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist. He is also the one speaking in today’s scripture reading. Traditionally, it’s called the “*Benedictus*” – a prophecy he spoke following John’s birth. This is Zechariah’s answer to his neighbors’ question, “What then will this child become?”¹

Now, his words stand pretty well on their own even without much context. It’s why they take the place of the Psalm in the Advent liturgies of the Lectionary cycle. But to fully appreciate why Zechariah is my favorite Christmas character, we need to fill in some of the backstory. So let’s rewind a bit in Luke’s opening chapter (which, by the way, is *really* long – 80 verses!).

Luke actually opens his gospel with Zechariah’s bio (after the 4 verse formal dedication to Theophilus): *“In 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. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.”*²

He then goes on to paint a picture of the day that Zechariah learned he was going to become a dad. He was on duty in the temple, and was chosen by lots to be the lucky member of the priestly team to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. As he was performing his duty, an angel of the Lord appeared to him by the altar, telling him that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a son, whom he should name John, and that their baby was going to be special – filled with the Holy Spirit right from the start. The angel tells Zechariah that his son is going to turn many people toward God with the spirit and the power of Elijah, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”³

¹ Luke 1:66

² Luke 1:5-7, *NRSV*

³ Luke 1:8-17

Zechariah's response is pretty much you'd expect from someone who'd had an angel appear to them when they were alone in a sanctuary: he's fairly surprised and kinda freaked out. And when he responds to the angel's pronouncement, all he has to say is "*How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.*"⁴

Well that is the last we hear from good old Zechariah until he utters the words of today's scripture. Because, as it turns out, questioning an angel who is telling you that your prayer for a child is going to be answered is apparently not the right move. Zechariah is cursed by the angel, who turns out to be Gabriel (yes, that Gabriel) and is struck mute – unable to speak again until the day his son is born.

And here I find a second point of resonance with Zechariah. Some of you know that in the year and half before I was called as one of your pastors, I developed a significant problem with my voice. Starting over Labor Day weekend in 2005, my up-to-that-point strong and reliable voice suddenly left me. Seeking professional help when it became apparent that it was a long-term problem rather than just a brief bout of laryngitis, I went through a number of evaluations, therapies, and treatment plans, the most significant of which involved several periods of complete vocal rest for six weeks at a time. No talking, no singing, no humming, no whispering. I was to remain completely silent. As you can imagine, this proved rather challenging as a full time youth pastor, full time seminary student, and trying to be full-time husband.

And since the first of those silent seasons stretched into Advent, as you can imagine there was no shortage of Zechariah jokes and allusions for a young theology student who had had his voice taken away from him. Quite suddenly, my attention was drawn to those images in Luke's opening chapter of Zechariah helplessly motioning to the crowd who waited for him outside of the sanctuary, and later asking for a writing tablet to confirm the name of his son. Having tried to lead youth events and participate in class discussions with the aid of a computer that voiced the words I typed, having conversations with Amanda that led to major life decisions using pencil and paper, even conducting a wedding rehearsal with a whiteboard and marker, my heart was drawn to this old priest, who was right in the center of the unfolding drama of the Christmas story, unable to speak a word.

And in my own enforced silence during Advent, the Christmas story was forever changed for me. Unable to speak, unable to sing, with nothing to do but watch and wait, listen and hope for better days ahead, I did a lot of reflection. A lot. It was a time of intense pain and intense formation, a time that found me wandering in the gloom of a dark night of the soul, but a time that also yielded some of the deepest and most enduring convictions that sustain and compel me to this day.

I have to imagine that Zechariah's silence was not unlike mine – painful, but also productive – a struggle, but also a stimulus. And one of the things of which I am most sure is that Zechariah's silence surely caused him to take a good long look in the mirror, search his soul, take stock of his life and faith, and finally ask why he wasn't ready when the angel came to him. And like any good professional religious figure, in his moment of crisis, he must have done what we all should do – he immersed himself in the traditions of his faith. At least the evidence suggests this was probably the case.

⁴ Luke 1:18

Commentator Robin Gallaher Branch puts it this way:

Now alone with his thoughts, unable to communicate except in signs and writing, Zechariah's nine-month "time-out" led to profound changes in personality and faith. Maybe he went to the scrolls, for his prophecy relies heavily on earlier words from Genesis, Psalms, Ezekiel, and Samuel. Zechariah, in his incubation of silence, meditated on an upcoming great move of God....God, in the silence of centuries, has done preparatory work for Israel. God in the silence of nine months, has done preparatory work in Zechariah...[and so] Zechariah's prophecy looks forward.⁵

And it is in this looking forward that I find a final point of resonance with Zechariah. I cannot imagine that his "incubation of silence" was a peaceful time for Zechariah. In fact, I highly suspect that it was a time a great inner turmoil – a heart-wrenching, soul-stretching time of trying to get himself right with God and right with himself. But it is that very turmoil which I also suspect redirected Zechariah's gaze from his present circumstances to a vision of what God was doing in the world, in and through his own life and the life of his wife and child. And when the moment of truth finally comes, and that beautiful baby boy enters this world, and he asks for a writing tablet to confirm the name of his son, he is ready to speak with the authority of one whose vision has been fine-tuned by the darkness.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...that we...might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.⁶

It is important to remember several things about these words. Not only were these words spoken by an elderly priest who had just endured what was probably one of the darkest times of his life, they were also spoken into a political situation that was hardly reflective of their fulfillment. Living in occupied territory under Roman rule, forced to endure the daily indignities of living as a defeated people subject to an oppressive foreign regime, it surely must not have felt as if God's promises of salvation and rescue from the hands of their enemies had been fulfilled. Ditto the audience to whom Luke first wrote shortly after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in the Jewish-Roman War.

But Zechariah – inspired by the muse of silence – was able to look forward and see beyond the present darkness, and give voice to a vision of when *"the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace."*

The "way of peace" can be a fuzzy concept. Is it personal or political? Within or without? A gift from above or a hard-won prize born of struggle? The simple answer is that it is all of these. In the words of Randle Mixon:

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Vol. 1. p. 37.

⁶ Luke 1:68-71,74-79, NRSV

As Advent continues; our ruminations go deeper. We wait, watch, wonder if we will ever know peace. Will we find peace in our own souls? Will there be peace on earth? ... not just peace as the absence of violence, but peace that passes understanding, peace that heals and makes whole, peace that allows the wolf to live with the lamb... peace that allows a little child to lead the people and bring them back into full communion with God...

The Benedictus, Zechariah's great hymn of prophecy, praise, and blessing clearly moves us toward that unfathomable, whole, creation-healing shalom of God. Here we find ourselves waiting and watching for something that we deeply desire, wondering if it will ever come. We may long for peace but we know we live in a world in which there is much too little of it, both personally and politically. ...[But] Though we may live in between times, when we do not yet fully walk in the way of peace, Zechariah promises that his little boy, John, will prepare us to bridge those times as we live toward God's reign.⁷

For me, this is the true meaning of Advent – preparing ourselves to bridge the past and the future – to live toward God's reign in the present. And Zechariah embodies Advent. He is the patron saint of those who aren't really ready for God to come knocking – those who need a proverbial kick in the pants to remember their past and see beyond their present turmoil into a future when the way of God's peace will carry the day. But how can we be confident in such a future when all around us the evidence points to the contrary? Careful now...this is exactly the kind of question that earned Zechariah a nine-month sentence of silence while his child grew in the womb.

As I was pondering this question, a friend gifted me with a well-timed email forward from *Sojourners*, which in the spirit of the season, I would like to regift to you. Reflecting on the darkness in her own spirit during the season of Advent, commentator Shannon Casey was reminded of civil rights activist Valarie Kaur's poignant question: "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?" "Remember the wisdom of the midwife: 'Breathe,'" she says. Continuing in Casey's words:

"Breathe," my therapist echoed on Friday as my tears flowed freely. Despite my usual defenses, something clicked in the moment and I confessed, "I feel *terrible!*" I'd been feeling terrible in that carrying-the-weight-of-the-world sense and had begun internalizing many of the never-ending layers of *the world is not as it should be*, especially while working in the medial field and carrying the weight and responsibility of patients on my shoulders. I want to be a healer. I want to do my part to make the world a little bit more *as it should be*. Despite our best efforts, still *the world is not as it should be*. Before long, the heaviness of this seeped inside me.

Since it doesn't take much to start feeling completely overwhelmed and disillusioned again, I keep returning to a question a friend of mine once posed: "Which corner of the garden is mine to tend?" We each have a role to play, and all we can do is our part. We are each tending our own corners of the garden. Krista Tippett writes about the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam*... The phrase literally means, "repair of the world," and it is both an invitation and an expectation; it is both a personal responsibility and a collective act to participate in the healing of the world. Tippett adds, "each one of us, flawed and inadequate as we may feel, has exactly what's needed to help repair the part of the world that we can see and touch."

⁷ Randle R. Mixon. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Vol. 1. pp. 33 & 37.

In the darkness of the womb, the future is waiting to be born. And yes, sometimes we'll feel terrible, but this Advent, may we have ears to hear the midwife as she compassionately reminds us to breathe.⁸

I wonder...was there a midwife by Elizabeth's side reminding her to breathe as she endured the labor pains of bringing John into the world? Could it have been overhearing just such a reminder that finally brought it all together for Zechariah – reminding him to breathe, that God was with them, so he could let go, and let God's promised future be born? And could that breath have, in the end, been all that was needed for Zechariah to see the vision to which he gave voice in today's scripture?

I'd like to think so. Because if worked for Zechariah, it just might work for us too. May it be so...

⁸ Shannon Casey. "Embracing Darkness this Advent Season." *Sojourners*. Online: <https://sojo.net/articles/embracing-darkness-advent-season>