

Luke 1:5-24a, 57-64

⁵In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and righteous decrees of the Lord. ⁷They did not have a child because Elizabeth was unable to bear children, and they were both well along in years. ⁸On one occasion, while Zechariah was serving as priest before God and his division was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰The whole crowd of people were praying outside the temple during the hour of the incense offering.

¹¹An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and overcome by fear. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son for you, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵because he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶He will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord.”

¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure of this, because I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years?”

¹⁹The angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and was sent to speak to you in order to tell you this good news. ²⁰Now listen, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things happen, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at the proper time.”

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering what was taking him so long in the temple. ²²When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them. Then they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. He kept making signs to them and remained unable to speak.

²³When the days of his priestly service were completed, he went back to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived.

⁵⁷When the time came for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they were rejoicing with her. ⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. They wanted to call him Zechariah after the name of the father. ⁶⁰But his mother answered, “No. He will be called John.”

⁶¹They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.” ⁶²They made signs to his father, to see what he wanted to name him.

⁶³He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they were all amazed.

⁶⁴Immediately Zechariah’s mouth was opened, his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.

Advent Silence

I.

It was quite an honor, but he was well prepared. What he was expected to do and what *needed* to be done, he well knew. Still, this particular duty should never be routine; it was special. All he had to do was sprinkle some incense in just the right way and tend to some oil lamps. It was the *place* he would do these things that made it all special. Zechariah would be performing these duties in the temple—in the Holy Place—near the presence of the Almighty God.

What an awesome responsibility and honor. It was something that also came with a little dose of fear.

Each morning and evening a priest would enter, trim the lamps, and burn incense before the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Just a few feet away from where

Zechariah would perform these duties, behind the curtain of the Most Holy Place, stood the ark of the covenant, where the presence of God was with his people.

These duties were performed every single day, but there were 24 divisions of priests who shared these duties, and there were many priests in each division. Some priests would *never* get the opportunity to serve in this way, so it was understood to be quite an honor. Zechariah looked forward to telling his wife, Elizabeth, all about it when he got home.

All was going according to plan when God intervened. Through the smoke and incense, Zechariah saw an angel standing by the altar. He jumped. He was terrified. These would be completely normal reactions by a human being in the presence of a holy angel.

I wonder which one was greater—the astonishment of seeing an angel, or the shock of the Angel Gabriel’s words. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son for you, and you are to name him John... ¹⁷He will ...turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord” (Luke 1:13, 17, EHV).

The shocks were too much for the priest. His logical mind questioned how this could be. “Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this, because I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years?’” (Luke 1:18, EHV). It’s as if he were asking straight out: “Give me a sign!”

Poor Zechariah. Faced with an unexpected blessing, he doubts and seeks additional evidence from just the word of the angel. He lost sight of the fact that the promised miracle *was* a sign. He had already been given what he wanted, but he just couldn’t believe it—at least, not yet.

Gabriel gave him what he wanted: another sign. “You will be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things happen, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at the proper time” (Luke 1:20, EHV). It wasn’t like the gracious first sign that was given, though that one wasn’t taken away.

When Zechariah came out of the Holy Place, he couldn’t speak. When he got home, he couldn’t speak to tell Elizabeth what he had seen and heard. He couldn’t speak for 9 months. But all the while, Elizabeth’s stages of pregnancy spoke the truth—day after silent day.

Even when his son was born, Zechariah still couldn’t speak. It was on the 8th day, when the child was to be circumcised and named, that he finally regained his voice. Relatives thought that the child should be named after Zechariah, but Zechariah had learned his lesson. “He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John’” (Luke 1:63, EHV). He gave the child the name the angel had told him to.

Zechariah immediately regained his voice and began to speak the words we know as the Benedictus—Zechariah’s Song—praising God for his faithfulness and salvation. John grew up to be John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus—the one who prepared the way for the Messiah.

II.

Zechariah learned the truth we need to learn today. God calls us to listen to him and to trust his promises. Before we can speak, we must listen to our Lord.

We live lives filled with sound. Unless we deliberately seek silence, most of our days will present us with many things to hear.

Perhaps you wake in the morning to the sounds of the alarm on your phone. Maybe you listen to some news or some music while you get ready to leave your house for the tasks of the day. Out in the world we are confronted by the sounds of traffic and crowds. We retreat into our cars and turn on the radio. Your phone sounds a tone to indicate an incoming text message or call, or you overhear someone else talking on the phone while they walk through a store. Your phone does double or triple duty by providing an endless stream of music.

Wherever we go, we are surrounded by sound.

Does the constant sound rob us of quietness? Does it distract us from listening to things that might be more important? Do these good gifts become burdens or curses rather than blessings?

Maybe you know people who can’t stand silence. Maybe that’s you. Silence seems endless. I love silence. I *need* silence when I’m studying for sermon preparation. When I’m doing the writing, all

I want disturbing the silence is the click and clack of the keys—nothing else. Silence gives time to think; to listen. For some, that can be uncomfortable. At times, we mask that silence with meaningless sound—background noise.

Have we become like Zechariah? We are able to speak and attend to all manner of things except those that matter most. God calls us to silence so we can listen—so we can hear his voice speak to us the words of life.

III.

The Bible is filled with examples of purposeful silence. Elijah heard God in “...a soft, whispering voice” (1 Kings 19:12). We are told to “Be still, and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10, EHV). Jesus told his disciples: “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31, EHV).

Never, however, does the Bible speak of silence just for its own sake. There is always a purpose for silence—a holy purpose.

It is good for us to be silent when we are confronted with our own sinfulness, just as Zechariah was. The world tries to excuse wickedness and laugh off guilt, but it doesn’t work. The mirror of God’s law shows us that we are guilty of sin before him. There is nothing to say. God calls us to silence so we may know who we are.

But he doesn’t leave us there. God calls us to that silence so we can hear his surprising word of grace and mercy, as we did in the service tonight as we confessed our sins and then heard the absolution, or forgiveness, announced by the pastor as from God himself. How awe-inspiring! His gracious love should stun us to silence. We don’t deserve such mercy. God gives to us the Word of life and salvation.

IV.

As we quietly hear his voice, God calls us to trust his faithful promises. Zechariah had demonstrated his trust in God throughout his life. Luke says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were: “both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and righteous decrees of the Lord” (Luke 1:6, EHV).

Sometimes even those who faithfully trust in God fail. Zechariah asked for a sign. Somehow when the promise got personal and when the promise was one for the ages, he found room to doubt.

We have also received many promises from God. We have the full history of God’s saving activity to teach us. We are called to faithfully believe it. We don’t have just the voice of an angel, but the voice of the incarnate Son of God himself. We have his inspired Word given to us. We have heard the promises again and again. We know that God keeps his promises. We believe.

In time, Zechariah believed God’s promises. The miracles we have seen have been far greater. We know the message of Zechariah’s son, John. We know the message and work of Jesus. We have seen the greatest sign of all—the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah, whose way John prepared. We have seen our sins die with him. Daily we put to death the Old Self, with its evil deeds and desires, and put on the New Self to live before him in righteousness and purity.

V.

In the silence of Advent, God calls us to remember, to believe, be quiet, to listen. God calls us to hear his voice and trust his promises.

This Advent—each day—he calls us to quiet our surroundings, our hearts and minds. Silence the noise and chaos of our sinful life and the world; silence the devil and fear and temptation and all the other distractions, so that we can hear him.

But he doesn’t call us to months of complete silence. After hearing his voice, he calls us to speak. As Zechariah spoke the Benedictus—Zechariah’s Song—so also we lift our voices in praise of God. As Zechariah proclaimed God’s salvation to others, we also tell them of the Savior who has come and who will come again.

Even as we speak these words, we never stop listening. Before we speak, we must listen to our lord. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Amen.