

“The Gift of Silence”

Introduction: Have you ever noticed how differently each gospel writer begins his account of the good news concerning Jesus? Matthew begins with a genealogy, tracing Jesus all the way back to God’s promise to redeem and restore the world through the descendants of Abraham. Mark begins with a word from Isaiah the prophet, linking Jesus to Messianic hope and the ultimate return of God’s people from exile. John begins in the rarified air of Greek philosophy, identifying Jesus as the word that reveals the God who became flesh and walked among us. I’ve saved Luke ‘till last because he is my favorite. He is my favorite because he begins by talking about me! My name is Zechariah. I was an Israelite priest, husband of Elizabeth, and father, remarkably, of John, also known as the Baptist. But that is getting a bit ahead of the story.

I am here to share with you a gift that I received before that very first Christmas, although it certainly didn’t feel like much of a gift at that time. It was the gift of silence. It helped me to center my trust on the living God in the midst of the dark and troubled and broken world in which I lived, a brokenness I know that you too experience. Well this gift of silence was a gift that helped me to persevere in these days. My hope is that it will be helpful to you as well.

I. Trouble Waiting

A. I lived in the days of King Herod, who served as the arm of the Roman Empire in our region in the decades just before BC would turn to AD. Many, if not most, were convinced that God had either forgotten or abandoned his people. Since the days when my ancestors had finished building the wall around Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah, and the writing of the prophet Malachi which soon followed, nothing more had been heard from God for over 400 years. Talk about waiting! Malachi had written his work to help the people prepare for the coming of the Lord, but nothing had happened. Though God’s people were back in the Promised Land, it didn’t really feel like the exile was over. Where was God, anyway, we were led to wonder?

B. When those kinds of questions surface, we need to be assured of the ground of our faith. Such a ground, or foundation, was what Luke had in mind when he sat down to write his account of the good news about Jesus. Actually, before he did that, he did a lot of very careful investigating. He consulted eyewitnesses, and he sat down with and listened to the ancient storytellers, who he calls “servants of the word.” Their job was to make sure that the accounts of Jesus as they were passed along orally, were passed along accurately. Moreover, as this first generation which lived in the days of Jesus began to die out, Luke, and others, wanted to record the good news about Jesus in written form so that going forward, readers, including you, could be assured the accuracy of what they were reading because what Jesus had begun to do was literally changing the world!

II. Zechariah and Elizabeth

A. But, back to me! I said I was a priest, however, this was maybe not as special as it sounds because in the days of the rule of Herod, there were almost 20,000 of us, perhaps as many as y’all have lawyers! We were split into 24 divisions. Mine was called Abijah, named after one of the priestly heads of my family. All of us would go down to Jerusalem to serve during the feast days, and then during the year each division would also be on duty for one week, twice in that year. One of the coveted roles

during that time of duty was to be the one who burned the incense that accompanied the morning and evening sacrifice in the temple. The smoke that rose up symbolized the lifting up of our prayers and sacrifices to the Holy One. Because there were so many of us, that role was chosen by lot. We had about one chance in a thousand. And, as luck would have it (though I no longer believe in luck) I was chosen! It became the experience of a lifetime, in several ways.

B. Before going further, I should tell you that I had a wonderful wife whose name was Elizabeth. She, like me, was a descendant of Aaron, the very first priest, so our spiritual heritage was about as pure as it could be. Together, we dutifully lived as God-honoring a life as possible. And yet we remained childless, unable to conceive throughout our many years, which simply puzzled us and truly tested our faith. What had we done to deserve such a fate? we often wondered. I would learn that being good doesn't mean that God somehow owes us something. His ways, his plans, are not our own. God is utterly committed to our well-being, but it doesn't mean he'll always rescue us from every storm we face or always act in ways that we would like. But he is at work, even when we may think he is not.

### III. In the Temple

A. So there I was, experiencing the thrill of a lifetime, burning incense inside the temple. While I was doing that, a whole bunch of people had gathered outside of the temple to pray, which they did on a daily basis. They prayed for God to act, for the peace and prosperity that the Roman Empire was noted for had actually been brought about by the sword and was being maintained through fear. Our expectation, our hope, was that one day, God would come and make things right, putting an end to the social and political oppression we were forced to endure.

B. While I was going about my appointed task and thinking on these things, I guess you could say that God came to me! God came in the presence of an angel, a holy presence that startled the stuffing out of me! You don't stand, or even kneel, in the presence of a holy God, and live to tell about it. But the angel told me not to be afraid, to relax, and to listen, for he had been given a message for me. Elizabeth and I would miraculously bear a son, and this son would be the one Malachi had prophesied about, the one who would prepare people for the coming of the Lord (Mal. 4:5-6).

C. Well, I'm almost ashamed to admit this, but since Luke decided to record it you already know – I didn't believe this word from God that had come to me. Maybe it was because by now I had become something of a cynic. On the outside I did all the right stuff, but God had been silent for so long that deep down, I had pretty much given up hope, hope that God would and could bring blessing to my life, and to the life of my people. And now that it seemed that God was going to do both, I doubted. And so the angel gave me what turned out to be an early Christmas present. It was the gift of silence. The angel struck me dumb and declared that I would be unable to speak until the day my son was born.

### IV. The Gift of Silence

A. In Psalm 46, the ancient writer begins: "Be still and know that I am God." Have you ever taken God up on that offer? Make no mistake about it, being silent is not easy. I lived, you also live, in a loud and busy world where not much is quiet. In that kind of world, silence seems so, well, unproductive! When silence comes, we often look for an opportunity to fill it. Part of the reason for that, I have come to believe, is that noise helps us to stuff down what's really going on inside of us. But when we're quiet, we make room for the Spirit of God to speak and bring to the surface that which we may have wanted to

avoid. It also allows time to reflect. My time enabled me to reflect on the amazing ways God can act, from enabling barren women, beginning with Sarah, to conceive, to dramatically rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt, to bringing them back from exile in Babylon. I had taught all of these things from God's word, but I guess I had not really connected them to my life. The gift of silence helped me begin to make this connection.

B. Now, when my silence finally ended, with the birth of my son, it birthed as well a song of praise which had been growing in me for nine full months! This song, known as the Benedictus (meaning blessed), is part of the worship of some of your Christian traditions. Would you join me in it?

<sup>68</sup> "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.  
<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David  
<sup>70</sup> (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
<sup>71</sup> salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—  
<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear  
<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.  
<sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Lk. 1:68-79)

B. Where could you use a little silence in your life? Where might you need to spend some time in quiet reflection on the hope that this season proclaims? Don't wait until Christmas Eve to sing silent night! How about giving yourself that gift of silence right now, to be enjoyed over these next weeks of advent? Maybe not nine months of silence, but how about starting with nine minutes each day, and then maybe stretching it out a bit more as the days go on? You might use this text to begin your silent pondering. Silence gives you the opportunity to make space for God to bring to the surface whatever he wants to reveal to you. It makes space for you to center your trust on the living God, especially when times are troubling. Won't you open that gift in this season?