

Advent II: Silence and Surrender  
Luke 1:5-24 & 1:67-79  
December 6, 2020  
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There's a shelf in our library that contains a collection of Christmas favorites. When my children were little, they would go each evening during December, pull down a book and ask us to read. "Twas the Night before Christmas and all through the house" or "All the Whos down in Whoville loved Christmas but the Grinch who lived north of Whoville did not." Sometimes after I put them to bed, I'd return to the shelf and pluck from the adult section, remembering Della, who had only \$1.87 from which to buy gifts on Christmas eve or Scrooge, whose evening of confronting the past, present and future began with the stark fact that his partner, Marley, was dead. Do you have such favorites? Stories, songs, or decorations that come out every year, serving as a reminder of those timeless truths about the season, that hearts can grow three sizes in one day or that the gift of love is a priceless treasure.

Luke is the gospel writer who pens the stories of Christmas we know so well, which we return to year after year in order to enter the wonder of God coming amongst us. But before we can arrive at the night when a decree goes out from Emperor Augustus, we must pull off the shelf the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, for Luke begins here. Before he gets to Bethlehem, before the spotlight turns to a young, trusting new mother and a couple who find no room in the inn, Luke takes us to an elderly household in the hillside, where prayers have been prayed for decades, where duty has been done, faithfully, year after year, where God has been working, slowly, quietly, tenderly, preparing them – and us – for that day when "the dawn shall break from on high and give light to those who sit in the shadow of death."

"In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, whose wife was named Elizabeth. They were righteous before God, lived blamelessly, but they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren and both were getting on in years." This is the good news of God's new work, but the story would not have sounded like a new one to those who heard it. Flip back from Luke to Genesis and find there Abraham and Sarah, the first faithful couple whose home remained empty of children while the years went by. Between Genesis and Luke are couple after couple, whose bodies seemingly excluded them from God's activity. God is on the move yet again, Luke tells us. Look for God to work through old, familiar channels.

Children were wanted but had not come. In the emptiness of their household, doubt arose. Are my prayers being heard? Who will care for us in our old age? Am I – my body, my life – a part of God's future? In scripture, children represent more than just a baby. They are symbols for inclusion in God's covenant. The child answers the question: Am I caught up in God's promise for life? Or has God forgotten me?

In this sense there are multiple variations of Zechariah and Elizabeth's opening scenario. I've done my best, worked my hardest, stayed honest when others played dirty. Now I've lost my

livelihood. Every effort I attempt feels pointless. My daily labor is but a tiny blot disappearing within a huge, impersonal machine. Am I caught up in God's promise or has God forgotten me?

Or, I've been a faithful follower, God. I've read my Bible, prayed each day and loved my neighbor. Yet my life can still feel broken. My friends and family not close enough. My deepest desires dreams scattered by the cruel wind. Am I part of your activity or am I excluded from dance?

There was once a devout, committed couple, who despite all of their efforts and trust, were barren. As Enuma Okoro writes, "At Advent's beginning, is a story about life's pain. Even devout, obedient people have unanswered prayers, unmet desires. Advent begins with longing, starts, not with joy but in sorrow."<sup>1</sup>

One year, when Zechariah is serving at the temple in Jerusalem, the job of entering the inner sanctuary to burn incense at the altar falls to him. It is the holiest of tasks, one a priest might perform only once in a lifetime. While he is in front of the altar angel Gabriel comes, to tell him his prayers are about to be answered. Zechariah is not ready, after so many years of disappointment, to believe the good news. How will I know this is true? In other words, why should I believe you? For his doubting response, Zechariah is silenced, rendered mute for the duration of the time between Gabriel's appearance and his son's birth.

If barrenness is the condition of this second Sunday, then silence might be our proper response. Silence. Our days are filled with noise: screens, videos, news alerts, and Netflix binging. There are sirens, notifications on our phones, and leaf blowers. Silence . . . is the empty sanctuary, the stillness of early dawn, the quiet sitting in front of candles or tree lights. Silence. I am most often struck speechless when I am overwhelmed by news I did not expect. Silence is a way of acknowledging I don't know as much as I thought I did, that I am not in control.

Zechariah's loss of speech may have begun as a corrective, a consequence for his reluctance to receive the very news for which he has prayed. But really it is a blessing. He receives a space in which to let God's movement in his life settle into his soul, dig a life-watering well into his heart, and grow. Okoro writes, "Zechariah had nine months to sit, ponder and process, because when God offers a word that seems too good to be true, we require a lot to believe it. As the months go by, he and Elizabeth become not just expectant parents, but pregnant with a seed of trust, belief and faith."<sup>2</sup> This is the gift of silence. How in this Advent season do you find space to ponder, process, and listen for God?

When the waiting is over, Elizabeth gives birth. Neighbors rejoice with this couple. Everyone comes out for the rituals of circumcision and naming. And a baby born to elderly parents, a sign of God's future, is surely to be named for his father. Here is Zechariah, Jr. Elizabeth corrects them. He is to be named John. John? The company of friends is confused. No one in your family

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<sup>1</sup> Okoro, Enuma, *Silence and Other Surprising Invitations of Advent* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2012) 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Okoro, 47, 54.

is named John. Surely you want to give this long-hoped-for baby his daddy's name. So they look to Zechariah, gray-haired, slightly stooped over, already weary from a few sleepless nights. Zechariah still cannot speak. He takes a stick to write his sentence in the dirt. His name is John.

I wonder if Zechariah wanted to name his son something different. If he thought, when Elizabeth told him they were expecting, I'm finally going to have a child who can follow me in the temple, be a priest like all the men in my family, take care of this house and the garden and us in our old age. I might name him after my father or my favorite uncle. Give him a strong family name. I wonder if he experienced any disappointment in remembering Gabriel's words. This child will be strong of character and Spirit. He will be great in the sight of the Lord and turn people back to God. Did Zechariah have any inclination of the desert-dwelling prophet his son will turn out to be? This child is not your child, but God's. You will name him John.

The names we give to people or moments symbolize our understanding of them. Language reveals our interpretation, our own perspective on a story. Think of the debates we have about how to name events. Is marching in the streets a riot or civil uprising? Is the pandemic a cocoon of time or an onslaught that risks disaster? By naming him John, Zechariah embraces God's framework for this child, this future. He surrenders to God's work for the world. By saying his name is John, he declares, I am willing for my life to be a part of God's redemption.

Barrenness. Silence. Surrender. Three truths of Advent. Where are you in the story? Can you sense the dawn breaking from on high, the light coming into the world?

We have lived this story for thousands of years. It is a story of life's potential being marred by life's brokenness. It is a story of faithful waiting, waiting, hoping, prayer, watching, being silent, waiting long. It is a story of endurance. It is a story of promise. "It is never too late for those who wait upon the Lord."