

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 27, 2022

Luke 1:8-22

So, as I mentioned, as we begin our time of worship, we are beginning a new worship series this day. We've entitled it Minor Figures, Major Faith; and so we're going to pay attention this season of Advent to some overlooked and under-appreciated figures of the story of the Incarnation. As we wait and as we prepare, we're going to focus on some folks who don't get the attention that they deserve. I think that each of these minor characters as we're calling them, minor figures, they have something to teach us. They have something to teach us about how it is that we actually prepare for the Incarnation of God in our midst. So we begin this day with Zechariah. We begin with the reading from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, beginning in the eighth verse.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How can I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you

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this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary.

When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen
Fear and terror overwhelm Zechariah at the presence of an angel. Gabriel will find out in just a few verses—that's who encounters Zechariah in that holy of holies—fear is his response. Terror and being overwhelmed. Interesting that one would enter the sanctuary of God and not expect a movement of the spirit in that place. Interesting that one would gather and be gifted with the ability and the privilege of being able to bring an offering before God, and when that offering is brought, there is surprise and fear and even terror that overwhelms, that God might send one to show up in God's place and encounter us. I wonder how many of us came to the sanctuary this day, this holy of holies for us here in Midtown Memphis, expecting a movement of the spirit of God. And if one was to befall us in this place, would we welcome it, or would we be overwhelmed by it? We begin the season of Advent in the Silence of Zechariah. Zechariah's experience encourages us to wonder, then, about the purpose of this silence. He asks what I would imagine is a pretty honest question. Upon being told that he and his wife are going to bear a child, he says, “How am I going to know that this is going to happen? I'm really old; she's getting on in her years. How will we know?” And almost defensively Gabriel says, “Because you've questioned me, you will not be able to speak.”

He comes out and is amongst his people. He's gone in just a little while earlier, a priest, which means he probably had many words to share with them quite often. Maybe he went long in his sermons when he was preaching to them. They knew him to be a person of speech, and when he comes out, he cannot.

So we must first acknowledge, as we begin our Advent journey together, the purpose and the power of silence. But before we acknowledge the purpose and power of silence, let us...let us acknowledge the problem of silence. Zechariah's inability to speak is problematic. In certain circumstances silence can feel like complicity.

In certain circumstances we need words to speak. Those among us who call ourselves followers of the way of Jesus Christ, we need to have words to articulate in a world filled with injustice. So

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when there is a...a shooting that targets our LGBTQ beloved, the church must speak. It must have a voice, and if it doesn't, then it is complicit.

When we hear people raise their own voices against our Hebrew brothers and sisters, the Church of Christ must not be complicit by our silence. Our silence in that moment would be problematic- at the very least. Silence brings with it purpose and power, but it also brings some problems. Silence perhaps across your holiday season can make you feel alone. It can make you feel like no one is present with you. God's silence at injustice can break our heart and make us question God's presence among us.

Silence can be problematic.

But this morning we address a different kind of silence, the kind that befalls us not because we are afraid to speak but because the experience we have had of God renders us speechless.

This thing has moved amongst and around Zechariah, and he comes out, and there isn't a word that will actually articulate what it is he has just seen, what it is he has just heard. So this morning we focus on a different type of silence, and it's a silence that has purpose to it. It turns out that silence can be instructive. It can help shape us. It could teach us about what it looks like and what it means to be faithful in our living. It can be instructive in letting us know that our words aren't actually the only thing at work in the world, that there is the very spirit of God moving amongst us and within us bringing about justice. And even amongst or against all odds peace. Richard Rohr says this of silence. "Silence is necessary. It is the necessary space around things that allows them to develop and flourish without my pushing."

Sometimes when we sit in silence, the purpose of it is to reorient us—to what we have power over in this world and what we don't. It is to place us once again at the throne of Our Lord, to recognize as Joshua proclaimed last week Christ alone as Lord. That it is indeed Christ's reign in which we live, so that instead of birthing Christ into the world, uh we can sit in silence and know that God is doing that work. We can welcome it; we can accompany it; we can encourage it with our presence; and we can understand that there is necessary space around things that we sometimes call silence. There is necessary space that allows them to develop and to be nourished without even our pushing. Silence then centers us on God's sovereignty alone. What if Zechariah had a voice when he left that holy of holies? What if he tried to explain what had just happened to the people who had gathered that day?

My imagination tells me his words would have been woefully short of giving a full and true and authentic expression. Because when we have had an experience of God, often words fail. So silence then for Zechariah is instructive as it is for us too. Silence can also be preparatory for our praise. It was for Zechariah. Sometimes praise means shouting, and sometimes it means sitting. It means being in a space spiritually, even physically, and emotionally to be prepared. Zechariah shows up three times in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This is the first time, 8-22, when he has this experience; but then there's another time and that comes later on in Elizabeth's pregnancy. It's when she is about to give birth, and everyone is asking. "Um, what name are you

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going to give your child?" She's given birth actually, and they're moving towards circumcision; and they ask what name you are giving to your child. And she says a name that's not in the family line. She says John, because she's been told that that is to be her child's name. Confused, they turn to Zechariah, who still can't speak. You can see him throw up his hands, point to her, and say what she said; but he can't say that, so he asks for a tablet, and he writes it down, and he says, "His name will be John." And it is at that moment, that moment, that he regains his voice—the first time he's spoken throughout Elizabeth's entire pregnancy, which for her was probably a blessing, but for the people it was confusing. It's the first time he speaks, and what scripture tells us then, beginning in the 59th verse and moving forward from there in the 64th verse of the first chapter of Luke, "Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God." Sometimes silence can be preparation for praise.

It can give us the space that we need to actually wrap words around our experience of the Divine. It can help us listen more carefully and closely to what it is that God is trying to say to us and what God is not trying to say.

When we learn to read the story of the Gospel and to see it as the story, the love of God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves, then with that insight, that insight produces again and again a sense of astonished gratitude which is very near to the heart of authentic Christian experience.

When we sit with the story of the Gospel, and we recognize that God is able to do and accomplish things we cannot even ask or imagine, like bring a child to Elizabeth and Zechariah or to Mary and to Joseph later, our right response, when our tongue is freed, is to praise God in gratitude.

Thinking about silence this week in the midst of a time that will become even more busy and loud over the next several weeks, and not only does silence have a purpose, but also it has a power amongst us. Silence can be an instructive tool that God uses to teach us. We have to be willing to listen. Listen first to our innermost thoughts. Listen also to the words of our neighbors. Silence then would become for us a place where our faith can develop. It can grow. It can be nurtured by God.

Because the presence of silence never means the absence of God. The presence of silence actually can amplify our witness to and understanding of God's presence. So I wonder if what Zechariah has to teach us in this season of Advent is that we must befriend the silence.

That we must sit with it in the quiet.

That we must not fill every moment with music, however beautiful it might be, or our podcast, or our videos, or social media, or whatever noise we have. We must not fill every waking moment with that. But instead we might be invited by this minor figure in our scripture to a deeper and more authentic faith, that understands that God works in silence creating newness within us and around us. I wonder on this day that brings the dawn of a new Christian year what Zechariah, I wonder what Zechariah might want to teach us. How we might move differently through the

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season of Advent when our first act is to hold silent. To not greet this new season with words but with deep breath, and with quiet.

I wonder what God might speak to us throughout this season if that was our initial posture toward it. What might God teach us as a community? What might God teach you in the silence of this Advent season?

It's an important question. I imagine it took Zechariah a little while to get to it. Once the fear and the astonishment fell away, and he was left with nothing but silence. What did he learn? How was he prepared for the incarnation of God? And how might we be prepared?

I want to draw to a close this morning with Wendell Berry's poem entitled The Silence. I want it to fall over us this day. I want it to encourage us and to maybe create within us—space.

Though the air is full of singing
my head is loud
with the labor of words

Though the season is rich
with fruit, my tongue
hungers for the sweet of speech

Though the beech is golden
I cannot stand beside it
mute, but must say

“It is golden,” while the leaves
stir and fall with a sound
that is not a name.

it is in the silence
that my hope is, and my aim,
A song whose lines

I cannot make or sing
sounds like men's silence
like a root. Let me say
and not mourn: the world
lives in the death of speech
and sings there.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen