

Advent 2C (12/9/2018)

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Zechariah's prophecy over his infant son, John, bursts forth from him after nine months of silence. If we were required to be silent for a time, to pay attention without speaking, what kind of truth might we be empowered to speak? The promise of Zechariah's prophecy is that the one whom God will send as light in the shadows will guide us into the way of peace. Attentiveness to others, and especially those whose voices have not been frequently heard, is a step along that way.

Before Jesus, there was John the Baptizer. And before John, there was his father Zechariah. The psalmody assigned for today is not, in fact, a Psalm, but comes from the first chapter of Luke. It's the prophecy that Zechariah proclaims over his infant son, John, at his circumcision, often called the Benedictus, Latin for "blessed," the first word in the famous canticle. It's also called the Song of Zechariah, and has traditionally been used as the Gospel Canticle for Matins, or Morning Prayer, one of the three daily prayer offices we've preserved in our worship resource. Zechariah's song is a beautiful way to proclaim the hope of the gospel at the start of a new day: "In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us." You can see the whole Morning Prayer liturgy beginning on page 298 of the red hymnal.

Zechariah's prophecy is especially noteworthy because it bursts forth from him, joy-filled and eloquent, after nine months of compulsory silence. Remember the story?

Once when [Zechariah] 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 of the 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 will 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 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.”¹

Upon hearing the news of John’s conception, Zechariah is skeptical. The promise of a child late in life does not conform to his view of what’s possible, and he says so. And for this, the angel Gabriel disciplines him, silencing him for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

Zechariah’s silence is often interpreted as a punishment for his lack of faith. But, what if there’s something more profound going on here? **What if an extended period of silence is not a punishment, but an opportunity? Imagine Gabriel saying *I, the messenger of the Lord, have been sent to give you this good news. But you don’t have ears to hear it, so I’m giving you nine months to let it sink in. Don’t talk; just listen. Don’t jump to your own conclusions; just be open to possibilities you haven’t considered before. Maybe after a time of such attentiveness you won’t rely so much on your own understanding and you’ll be able to speak some real truth.***

Of course, it’s not just a suggestion. Zechariah doesn’t have a choice in the matter, but he does experience a change. After nine long months, with the promise fulfilled and his baby boy resting in his arms, Zechariah is suddenly inspired to speak: “You, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare

¹ Luke 1:8-20.

the way, to give God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

I feel for Zechariah. I can't imagine falling silent for nine hours, let alone nine months. Those of you who've endured Bible study or adult formation with me probably can't imagine it either. I have lots of ideas banging around in my head, and they're just dying to escape through my mouth. What's more, on account of my identity – male, white, straight – the world gives me plenty of latitude to express myself and plenty of reason to assume that I'll be taken seriously. And in this way, I'm a lot like Zechariah. As a member of the priestly class descended from Levi, he was entrusted with the preservation of Israel's religious tradition and thus held a position of relative power. His views mattered in an official sense, so it's not surprising that he would have the nerve to reply candidly to the angel Gabriel. What is surprising is that he would be compelled to keep quiet and listen for once.

If you were required to be silent for a time, to pay attention without speaking, what kind of truth might you be empowered to speak? In her memoir, *Waking Up White*, Debby Irving emphasizes the importance of listening in the quest for understanding and justice in matters relating to race and racism. **Listening – real listening, and not just waiting for our turn to speak – requires that we acknowledge realities to which we simply have not been exposed on account of our identity and corresponding blind spots.** To those who want to discover those realities and become part of the movement toward healing, Irving writes, "Prepare

yourself to adopt an ‘I don’t know what I don’t know’ attitude. The sooner you can become comfortable with seeking what you don’t know, as opposed to proving what you do, the more you will learn and the more effective you’ll become as a racial justice advocate.”²

That sounds a little like the angel Gabriel: ***Zechariah, because your frame of reference prevents you from hearing what God wants you to know, I’m inviting you to adopt an “I don’t know what I don’t know” attitude for the time being. Wait, listen, see what’s possible with God. Then, when the time is right, you’ll have true and hopeful words to speak.*** And he does: “In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

John the Baptizer’s purpose will be to prepare the way of the Lord. And the Lord – the one whom God will send as light in the shadows – his purpose will be to lead us on the pathway to peace. Dear church, at every turn the world expects us to justify ourselves, to insist that we’re right and worthy over against those whose experiences have led them to different truths. But **if we are to partake in the world’s healing, we’ll have to resist the urge to speak up all the time. We’ll have to wait, listen, and see what’s possible with God. And when we do, we’ll learn for ourselves how attentiveness, and especially attentiveness to those whose voices have not been frequently heard, is a step along the way to peace.**

² 252.