

Speechless Wonder

Luke 1:5-22; 57-79

Sermon by Mag Richer Smith

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Advent 2

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13But 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. 14You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15for 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. 16He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17With 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.' 18Zechariah 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.' 19The 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. 20But 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.'

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22When 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.

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' 61They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' 62Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. 64Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

68 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
 69 *He has raised up a mighty saviour for us*
in the house of his servant David,
 70 *as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,*
 71 *that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.*
 72 *Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,*
and has remembered his holy covenant,
 73 *the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,*
to grant us 74that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, 75in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
 76 *And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;*
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
 77 *to give knowledge of salvation to his people*
by the forgiveness of their sins.
 78 *By the tender mercy of our God,*
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
 79 *to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

**MAKE READY FOR THE CHRIST, WHOSE SMILE, LIKE
 LIGHTENING, SETS FORTH THE SONG OF EVERLASTING GLORY
 THAT NOW SLEEPS IN YOUR PAPER FLESH...LIKE DYNAMITE!**

This is Advent and these words from Thomas Merton shape our calling: to **Make ready** for the Christ...to **prepare** for the **birthing** God has in store **within** each of **us** & on this **planet**.

How are we **getting ready** for the **Christ**?

What are the **practices** that *help* us PREPARE the WAY?

Perhaps **Zechariah** can **nudge us** in our preparation today.

It begins with **Speechlessness**...

Have you ever experienced it?

Bob and I were in the delivery room and had just experienced the birth of our second child...Our eyes filled with **tears of gratitude and wonder**.

Birth is a **miracle** that is *hard* to put into words.

This quiet moment of holy awe was **abruptly altered** by the doctors' alarming voice:

"There's another baby in here!"

In the blink of an eye, our family was **reshaped beyond our imagining**. And the response of the parents?

SHOCK, DISBELIEF AND DEAD SILENCE.

In our story today, that is **how Zechariah greets** the birth announcement. His **future**, too, is **forever altered** and **far from what he has imagined** in his old age.

There had been a time years ago when **he'd dreamed** of a **new birth**, but those dreams have **long been buried**.

HE lives with **emptiness, grief**,
and likely with **fatigue in trying to be faithful**.

It is an **overwhelmingly DARK time!**

Israel is living under a **narcissitic ruler** who

bullies the most vulnerable,
runs over the poor,
& tears children from their parents.

And the people are under the thumb of a **wealthy military empire** that abuses resources and keeps them in captivity.

Zechariah has never seen it this BAD,
but he *trudges* on in **dutiful obedience** to the God he
serves...*despairing* the **times**, the **policies**, and his own sad
heart.

But on this particular day, **Zechariah wins the lottery!**
Out of 18,000 priests, he draws the lot to enter the Holy of
HOLIES and offer the incense.

For a Jewish priest this was a **once in a lifetime** opportunity
and as **close** as anyone gets **to God's dwelling place** on
earth... a ***"thin place"*** indeed!

"Thin places" are a kind of **holy ground** where **heaven and
earth merge** together and one EXPERIENCES the **nearness of
Divine Presence**- as close as breath.

And here in this Holy of Holies, Zechariah *experiences* the
wonder of that presence...

It's like he can **feel** the **heartbeat of God**,
And he **receives** a message that **NEW LIFE is coming...**
For him, for Elizabeth and for all of Israel!

A **child** will be born who will **PREPARE THE WAY** for a new
regime, for the promised MESSIAH of PEACE.

***"God isn't finished with this world yet, Zechariah,
and God isn't finished with YOU.***

***Make ready. Make ready for new birth.
Make ready for the Christ."***

Zechariah *greet*s this incredible message from GOD with
disbelief. And a SHOCK that results in **dead silence**.

But what Zechariah will *find* is that **God**
waits for him in that silence,
comes to him in the silence,
 and **speaks** to him,
 when he becomes **still enough to listen** for God's whisper in
 the *quiet waiting room of his soul*.

The poet Rumi says that

“SILENCE IS THE LANGUAGE OF GOD.”

And the mathematician Blaise Pascal said centuries ago
 that : *“All of humanity’s problems stem from our inability
 to sit quietly in a room alone.”*

Henri Nouwen reminds us that

*“**quiet stillness is essential** for our spiritual lives,” admitting
 that “It is not an easy place, since our **fears** have us grasping at
distractions and **immediate satisfaction** Solitude is not
 immediately **satisfying**, because it’s where we **meet** our
demons, our **addictions**, our feelings of **lust** and **anger**, and our
 immense need for **approval & recognition**. But if we do **NOT**
 run away, we will meet the One who says, ‘**Do not be afraid, I**
am with you. And I will guide you THROUGH the valley of
darkness...And remember. My way is the way of peace and
nonviolence.”*

A Catholic sister once told me that she knew no one who
 regularly practiced CENTERING PRAYER (that silent, listening,

being prayer) who also could support warfare. Maybe if we LISTEN deeply enough to the Spirit of Jesus, we will all find the Way of peace.

Peacemaker John Paul Lederach in a recent article in THE MENNONITE writes:

“In late September and early October I watched too much news. If you wished, you could be an hourly eye witness to how people are choosing to lead America these days, to how we seek truth and speak to each other and to how we as a nation ordain our judges.

At one point I turned off the sound and just observed faces. With rare exception I saw raw suffering.

Some of that suffering took a FEW people toward slower, inner reflection. Some of the suffering took MANY toward rage.

We seem to live in an age of rage. I watched America devour itself. A sad heart climbed into my throat, looking for refuge. My tongue went Zechariah! When we in this country behave so badly, perhaps the time has come to be silent.”

For almost a year **Zechariah** will **refrain from words**, and in the **stillness** he will **face the fears** that long have bound him and in the process **hopeless resignation** will be **transformed** into **bold envisioning**...the **darkness WILL turn to dawning**.

In 1989 Bob and I were on sabbatical taking a class on Spiritual life Disciplines at AMBS.

I was 10 years into pastoral ministry, had 3 young (very active) children and was ***exhausted***, the ***well was dry***, and I was ready to ***throw in the towel*** to pastoral ministry.

One of the class requirements was to attend a **silent retreat**, scheduled for a Saturday. Because I had **no childcare** on weekends, & because I thought this an **unnecessary extra**, I **tried to get out** of that retreat, but our instructor, Marcus Smucker, ***refused*** to give me “an out,” and even helped me arrange childcare for the day.

I could not imagine a day ***wasted*** in silence, and I certainly did not anticipate it being **worth the hassle** of getting there.

But I was wrong.

That day I took my journal to a spot beside a little lake. The ***sun's dazzling reflection*** on the water sent ***firey sparks*** to the red bush beside me. There I was with a ***literal burning bush that was not consumed***. And I knew it was holy ground.

I took off my shoes and listened to a Whisper that both renewed my calling:

Come home, come home

You who are weary, come home.

Let my flame melt, mold and fill you anew.

Lo, I will be WITH you always.

You cannot go where I am not.

That day my **inner darkness** experienced some *dawning*,
and I moved into a space of **renewed**
trust & readiness.

That day of silence created a hunger
for more and deeper communion,
for establishing a regular rhythm of time set aside from
frenetic activity, time for *being still* enough to KNOW that
God is God, GOD is HERE, God is LOVE, & God is with.

Where do we take our weariness and doubts?

How do we attend to THE VOICE OF LOVE &
make ready for the Christ?

Where is our **spiritual closet**?
our **cave** for *quiet listening*?
that **space** for **lighting a candle** and *watching & waiting*
& being **still enough** for **fresh light to dawn** upon us?

Here at Berkey we have a **Sunday School class** called
WOMEN TENDING OUR SOULS. In all my years in the church,
I have never had a weekly class that sits together in silence.

We light a candle and practice silence which may periodically be broken by people sharing
what we are hearing, and then at the end of the class we pray for one another. I asked the
class members to share in a sentence what they are experiencing in this practice of being
silent together. Here are the testimonies of your Berkey sisters:

In silence, I settle deeply into my status as a child of God, claiming my "belovedness" amidst insecurities & doubts. IN fact my insecurities & doubts are transformed into GIFTS through which God reveals the immediacy of love. In silence I experience release, wholeness, & God's nearness.

Though it's taken practice and patience, the silence of our space now allows me to quiet the chatter of my mind enough to clearly listen to the voice of my heart instead.

In silence God invites me to let go of anxiety, stress, and negative thoughts and find REST. I am invited to just BE here, and in this practice I experience how God LOVES me as my truest, simplest self. And in that RESTING & in the TRUTH I believe there is FREEDOM to be found.

In silence I connect with the Divine and a great friend of my soul; and KNOW that I am loved.

My first response would be "In silence I constantly wrestle with my over active thoughts... But then begin to experience the vastness of the universe with the Divine as its energy."

In silence I find mysterious peace that passeth all understanding. In some of the darkest times in my life, I have found inexplicable PEACE and groundedness through this practice.

Silence is the ever welcoming space of full acceptance and full challenge. In holy silence, I am my whole self in God and I keep becoming my whole Self in Christ. Like a murky pond after the rain, in silence I return to stillness. The stirred up sediment of life settles, slowly, so that I can see into the depths and reflect the blue sky once more.

Silence takes me to communion with God, others and with creation itself.

This regular practice is more than just “MY GOD AND I WALKING THROUGH THE FIELDS TOGETHER”...This is where I am nudged to more availability, deeper resolve, greater clarity and livelier passion for embodying the Christ.

And lest we think that this is a practice just for women, we need to be reminded that we are here talking about **Zechariah, John and Jesus** and many other men through the centuries and **here at Berkey** who have heard what Zechariah heard...

“Now is a needed time for being still, to **Watch & Wait & Welcome** me into your fear and fatigue.

Name your doubts and find me **waiting** within them. And **GET READY**, because I am about transformation and I want you to be a conduit for the **LIGHT** I am bringing into the world.”

We can imagine Zechariah in this year of silence, spending time **in NATURE, in the wilderness**, walking beside the **stream**, observing the **trees**, listening to **birds singing** and the **creatures stirring**, looking out across the **hillsides**, & **glimpsing** more of the **Creator’s vast imagination**. Time with **nature** often **reveals God’s dream** for a peace-filled world & strengthens our desire to be **available for its unfolding**.

IN this year of Zechariah's solitude, and listening for God **intercession** must also be **coming to the forefront**.

Zechariah is one of those "SOMEBODIES who prays for us,"
He prays for the **children yet to be**.

And prays for **that particular child**, in whom he **hopes to nurture the light & prepare the Way** for God's desires to be perceived.

Then later we will find his son **John** living out in the **wilderness**, where his dad regularly took him camping.

And there in this stillness John **makes ready for the Christ...** and then ~ *Like dynamite~ with fiery passion* proclaims the need for us to **turn, turn around, be forgiven and renewed**, because God's **agenda** is about transformation for lives, societies and the world.

There is a church somewhere who had its advent words before the congregation : **GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST...** but the "**E**" was missing and they decided not to repair it, because it now said: **Glory to God in the High St,** and **that** IS the message before us all!

The Good News of Christ's COMING is for the **streets out there** & John is calling the people to **do justice** for the little, last & least, because that is **where Jesus will be found!**

And the impetus, , the **ability to hear** & to become **available~** happens when **WE** become **STILL** & **know that God IS God**, and God is **here** to DAWN upon us.

God is here to ***upset regimes*** that **disregard the poor** and ***unbar the gates*** of all that **holds us captive!**

John prepares the way and makes ready for the CHRIST.

Zechariah's journey into silence **began with disbelief** and ends in the **song of everlasting glory** that has been sleeping in **his** paper flesh~ ***like dynamite.***

His first word after a year of silence is ***"Blessed, Blessed"...*** a word of praise for the ***merciful one*** who ***gazes on us with favor*** and ***raises up*** for us a **savior**.

And he ends his song of praise with this blessing.

*"By the tender mercy of God,
may the DAWN from ON HIGH break upon us... To
give light to those who sit in darkness and in the
shadow of death And to guide our
feet in the WAY OF PEACE."*

I took a class on centering prayer from a Carmelite sister during the second Iraq war, and she told our class that she did not know anyone who practiced this discipline of silence who was for the war.

Silence teaches us the WAY of peace, love for one another. Far from withdrawal or exclusion, our opening to God in solitude reveals a holy communion with God and others and with creation itself.

So again the question for us today is HOW are we making ready for the Christ, whose smile like lightening sets for the everlasting song that now sleeps in our paper flesh~ like dynamite!

There was an article in the New York Times a few months ago about John Francis who woke up on his 27th birthday in 1973 and decided not to speak for the day.

He found he liked not talking, so extended his vow of silence for a year. In the end, he didn't speak for 17 years. "I kept feeling I had more to explore," he says.

"AND what I found was personal transformation, realizing how loud my inner chatter had become and that I only ever listened to people long enough to start formulating what I was going to say next; but, he says,

our minds don't need to be filled up with endless chatter.

So he counsels people to take a break from texting, emailing and participating in social media. At least, he says, minimize your digital output. "A big part of being silent is being the recipient, not the broadcaster."

"When you refrain from words, you're going to hear more, and be able to attend to the voice of that deep spirit lying within.

It is the SPIRIT OF PEACE.

I'm not advocating that any of us take a 17-year hiatus from words, but in our overly noisy, frenetic, and screen-filled lives, Zechariah's story may encourage us to build a rhythm of being still and listening to tender mercy, and then becoming a passionate part of preparing the WAY for the transformation of Jesus CHRIST and his Peace.

I think Zechariah's time of silence must have led him to the wilderness... To an experience of God in nature, under the trees, beside the desert boulders, along the stream, looking out across the hillsides and noticing the vast creativity of GOD.

Recently on a retreat we were on a mountain where there are caves of prayer. Little huts and hovels in the rocks where people for centuries have used for silence and

prayer. Before entering the caves, our retreat leader read these words from

Roch Niehmier, a Franciscan scholar:

"First and foremost, solitude offers an opportunity for self knowledge in a way no other experience can provide. I have the chance to offer my human nature to myself in the raw and see how I am truly next to God. In silence, I get rid of my scaffolding; no friends to talk to, no calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music or books to distract...just me: naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, broken. It is this powerlessness, this poverty, this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, something so difficult that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, my distractions, for validation ...so I can make myself believe that I am someone important or something else."

Then as one has the courage to become comfortable with oneself in silence, self-discovery emerges with the potential for growth in inner freedom and integrity of life.

New insights, a deeper self confidence, is all due to self knowledge.

Years ago during the second Iraq War, I attended a week long retreat and workshop with the Carmelites. And in one session, I remember the Catholic Sister leading us say, "I don't know anyone who practices Centering prayer who is

for the War in Iraq.” (Centering prayer is that quiet being in God’s presence, letting go of all our compulsions to DO)

It struck me that this was not a pacifist Mennonite saying if one is silent enough before God, one gets to the non-violence self giving love of Jesus for everyone. This was someone from another tradition who practiced a silent listening to the heart of God..

And notice what happens to Zechariah: This fearful non-believer who has been shocked into silence, experiences a tender, tender mercy washing over his soul and attending to the earth.

Calling Zechariah to be the somebody who prays for the child... even for the one who is not yet. Zechariah’s prayer for the one who will come reminds me of how this congregation prepared for the children who were not yet present here at Berkey and then trusted that if classes and teachers were in place and ready to receive the children, God would provide.

Silence deepens Zechariah’s trust in the TENDER MERCY OF GOD...as he personally experiences the new beginning of forgiveness, freedom from hatred of the enemy, and trust in the saving God will yet do.

By the **tender mercy** of God...

there will be a NEW DAWN and it will come from on high.

It will be light for all who sit in darkness in the valley of the

shadow of death. And what will it look like:

a vocation in Peace-making...

Not an easy vocation, no guarantees of freedom from harm, (this Way got Jesus killed, it will have John's head, The Vocation of peacemaker killed Martin and Oscar and MJ, too). And it may kill us.

But as Zechariah declares in the song that arises from his silence, joining the prophets of old who saw lions lying down with lambs and reconciliation and equity for all humanity is WORTH our last life breath.

How might we incorporate a rhythm of silence into our day...a time of deep listening to the still, small voice who longs to dawn upon us and guide our feet in the Way of peace?

I am well aware we represent here a variety of life stages. For me as a semi-retired, empty nest person, finding time to be still and silent is easy now. But I remember the days of three little children when maybe the only time for silence was that fleeting moment after they were all asleep. So we do what we can when we are able.

But I also can see Zechariah spending lots of time with his child, out in the woods, camping, watching insects and birds and looking for honey. . Because when John grows up we find him in the wilderness from which bold proclamation breaks forth.

Silence is for the purpose of equipping a people to know our souls' have worth and to make us conduits of Christ and his love in the world. work.

Zechariah knew it was for the purpose of guiding OUR FEET in the way of peace.

Joan Chiddister:

"I arise today in the name of Silence Womb of the Word, In the name of Stillness Home of Belonging, In the name of the Solitude of the Soul and the Earth"

- **John O'Donoghue Eternal Echoes**

Contemplative