

“A Devout Old Couple”
Luke 1: 5-25
Makemie Presbyterian Church
December 6, 2009

⁵In 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, & her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments & regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren & both were getting on in years. ⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God & his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord & 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; 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 & you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy & gladness & 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 & power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children & 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 & my wife is getting on in years.”

¹⁹The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God & I have been sent to speak to you & to bring you 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.”

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah & wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them & they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them & remained unable to speak.

²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived & for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

This ends the reading.

Luke begins his gospel with two characters you almost never hear about in church because they only come up at Christmastime, when everyone else is rushing on to Bethlehem. But according to Luke the story of Jesus begins way, way before the night of the bright star. It begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were the parents of the one who would announce the one who was to come.

They started out a barren old couple, both descendants of Aaron, both raised in priestly families to serve the temple in Jerusalem. In another time they might have been a clergy couple, but in their own time it was only Zechariah who went into the family business. Elizabeth's job was to have priestly children, only she didn't and in her day all the blame fell on her. She was barren, as good as dead, and Zechariah could have divorced her for it.

He did not divorce her, however. Both of them were righteous, Luke tells us. Both of them lived blamelessly before the Lord, which means they shared something as important as children – a way of life that bound them together as surely as getting up for midnight feedings or taking turns with the bedtime bath. When it was time for Zechariah to serve his week in Jerusalem, Elizabeth did not hang onto him. Her father and her father's father had done the same thing.

Whether or not she went with Zechariah in body, she went with him in spirit, and what he did there he did for her as well.

The story Luke tells us turned out to be the most important day in both their lives. When Zechariah's section reported for duty that day, they cast lots to see who would do what and Zechariah got the prize. He alone would enter the sanctuary to burn incense on the holy altar, while the whole assembly of the people prayed outside. The smoke he produced would carry those prayers to God, perfuming them as they rose. Then Zechariah alone would emerge from the sanctuary to bless the people, representing God to them as he had represented them to God.

It was a job no priest could do twice in his lifetime and some never got to do it at all. It was as close as Zechariah would ever get to the Holy of Holies and still he was terrified when an angel appeared to him. *What did he expect?* Maybe he was concentrating so hard on what he was doing that he forgot whose living room he was in. Or maybe he suffered from the curse of the professionally religious, who are so often frightened when God interrupts their routines.

If you ask me, he was scared because he was thinking about Elizabeth instead of the incense. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah,” the angel told him, “for your prayer has been heard.” Which prayer was that? Not a prayer for the people, on that day of days, but a prayer for a child of his own. It was going to happen, the angel told him. It was such a sure thing that the miracle already had a name: John. Then the angel went into glorious detail about all that child would be and do. “Joy and gladness,” the angel said, “spirit and power,” but Zechariah held back.

“How will I know that this is so?” he asked the terrible angel. “For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.” It was an awful moment, one of those thudding *faux-pas* that make you wish you could start over again, like when your beloved gives you the very present you asked for and the first thing you say is, “How much did that cost?”

“How will I know that this is so?” The commentaries call Zechariah’s question the sin of disbelief, but I wonder about that. You might also call it a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness. He had waited a long time for something that was systematically denied him. He had gotten used to not being

heard. How was he supposed to know that this time would be different?

“I am Gabriel,” the angel answered him. That is how you will know. Then, because Zechariah did not believe the good news, the angel silenced him, so when he emerged from the sanctuary on that day of all days he could not even finish doing his job. The people who had waited for a blessing went home without one, while Zechariah played a lonely game of charades on the temple steps. The religious professional could not speak, because an angel had silenced him.

Whenever this story is told, Zechariah’s muteness is treated as his punishment for doubt. Because he could not say something nice he was not allowed to say anything at all. Or, more to the point, because he could not get with the program he was excluded from it. But he was not excluded from it. He remained essential to it. He may not have been able to speak when he got home but he was perfectly able to do something else, and it was not long before Elizabeth conceived. As the quiet months passed, her swelling belly gave him the proof the angel would not and when the child was born both his mother and his father agreed that his name was John.

Zechariah could do it, but he could not talk about it. It seems entirely possible to me that this silence was the angel's gift to him – an enforced sabbatical, a gestation period of his own during which the seeds of hope were sown again in his hushed soul. He could not learn anything with this mouth open. Nothing he could say could hold a candle to what was happening right in front of him, and his muteness turned out to be the wilderness in which his dream was born.

I like to think of Zechariah as the patron saint of the twenty-first century church. Like him, we have been waiting a long time for our prayers to be heard. “And he will come again to judge the living” we say over and over again. But where is he, exactly, and how much longer must we wait? It is hard to know what to say when people ask us where God is. Have faith? Be patient? Prayer works? Our words have gotten as old and tried as we have, and in many cases people have stopped believing us. They ask us the same thing Zechariah asked his angel. “How will we know that this is so?” Maybe it is time for us to claim the angel's gift of silence again – to stop talking so much, to stop trying to explain, to shut our own mouths before the terrible mystery of God and see what the quiet has to teach us.

I am not proposing that the church go mute, but I am wondering if it is not time for us to explore the idea that less is more. Our age is an age of bombardment, in which the zoom lens brings us face-to-face with more grief than we can bear. We are bombarded with images; we are also bombarded with words. It is always rush hour on the information highway. Each day feeds our addiction to data, to analysis, to the tantalizing illusion that someone can tell us what is really going on.

Meanwhile, very few words come at us without some hidden purpose. Words are used to win our votes, to change our minds, to empty our wallets. Words promise us things they cannot deliver and pretend to know things no one can know. There is no longer much correlation between word and truth. Each of us reserves the right to wait and see for ourselves. "How will I know that this is so?"

What would happen in a world like this if Christians were to become very still and quiet, creating oases of silence for people whose ears ache and whose heads hurt from all the noise? What would happen if we stopped pretending we could read God's mind and just sat down somewhere to do nothing together, watching out for whatever new thing God is doing next? What if, when we did speak,

we committed ourselves to telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, including all the things that we do not and can never know about God? What if we believed that silence is a virtue, pleasing to God?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has written a book called *God was in the Place and I, I did not know*. In it, he evokes the temple in Jerusalem – not Herod’s temple, the one Zechariah served, but Solomon’s temple – God’s first house on earth. According to Kings 6, the room was empty except for a throne that was also empty. Two golden cherubim spread their wings over it, facing each other across the mercy seat. Once a year their solitude was broken, when the high priest came to make amends for the people on the day of atonement. Inside that room, he had only one job: to utter the sacred name of God. The problem was, God’s name was all written in vowels and no one knew how to pronounce. No one was even allowed to try. As the high priest breathed in and out he could hear the sacred name on his lips. Yah-weh. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. God’s perfect privacy and freedom, confessed with every human breath.

“Creation has at its center an empty throne in an empty room in which the unpronounceable Name is spoken once a year. And the

sound of its name is the sound of breathing"! Kushner adds a pungent detail to the story. Before the high priest goes into the presence of the Lord, the other priests tie a rope around his leg, so that if he is struck dead inside they can haul him out without risking destruction themselves.

We, meanwhile, crawl right into God's lap and start asking, "Why?" Perhaps Jesus himself has emboldened us, calling God, "Abba" and telling us not to fear. But there is still room for reverence. There are still times to leave even the right things unsaid so that the silence resounds.

Zechariah learned the hard way. He could not speak until all the angel promised him had come true. Our own silence is voluntary, such as it is, a waiting and a watching that will settle for nothing less than the truth. It may turn out to be once again, the wilderness in which the dream is born, the utter quiet that open the way to the night of the bright star.