

## Re-imagining Salvation: Zechariah and Elizabeth

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Sometimes we need to recover and re-imagine old words. They have lost their meaning and power.<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg has written a wonderful book, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored*. Like the word “salvation”. Is it more than, as I was taught, saying what we called “the sinner’s prayer” and getting into heaven? Let’s begin to re-imagine salvation with Luke’s gospel as our guide. Through his words, images and stories, he will deepen and enlarge the meaning of the salvation God brings.

From Advent to Easter I will be preaching and teaching through Luke’s gospel, in Sunday School and worship. There are three questions I want us to ask as we read through Luke: 1) Who am I—in this text and in God’s story? 2) What is God calling me to be and to do? And 3) Who is my neighbor—the one God has called me to love as myself? These questions apply to our church as well as to us personally: Who are we? What is God calling us to be and to do? Who is our neighbor? Today the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Luke begins his gospel by setting it on the stage of world history: “In the days of Herod, king of Judea.” Herod fancied himself as the Davidic King Israel had been looking for, calling himself “King of the Jews.” He was in fact an evil and ruthless king who cared only about his greatness and power. This is the way of would-be kings.

God had another Davidic king in mind, however, and so God planned an intervention. It began with a country-side priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who was descended from Aaron, brother of Moses and Israel’s first priest. They were among the “Anawim,” the poor of Israel. But in Luke what is common becomes uncommon, and the low are lifted high!

Zechariah were righteous and devout. They were also up in years and despite many prayers childless. (Echoes here of Abraham and Sarah).

This day was supposed to be one of the highlights of Zechariah’s life. It was his day to enter the holy temple and offer incense on behalf of all Israel. Most country-side priests had this privilege only once in their lives.

Elizabeth, no doubt, beamed as she helped him on with his robes. He had rehearsed this day as long as he could remember. He, going into the sanctuary would offer prayer on behalf of Israel, then scatter the bowl of incense on the

burning coals. When he finished he would return to the outer steps of the temple where people were waiting and offer Aaron's benediction:

The Lord bless and keep you

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Then he and Elizabeth would go home and celebrate. Today he had been Israel's priest! But that's not quite what happened.

## II

He entered the temple and the holy sanctuary. He said the prayer and scattered the incense on the hot coals. Suddenly out of the side of his eye he spied another figure to the right side of the altar. No one was allowed in that holy space except the priest.

It was Gabriel, angel of the Lord. Zechariah was terrified. He began to shake and could not stop shaking. You might think meeting an angel would be fun and exciting, but that's not what happens in the Bible. The first response is fright—which is why angels always begin their speeches: "Be not afraid!"

"Be not afraid", Gabriel said to Zechariah, "your prayer has been heard. Your wife will bear a son, and you shall name him John. You will be filled with joy

and gladness, and he will be great in the eyes of the Lord.” Then some instruction: “He must never drink wine or strong drink.” (This is the first hint that he will be called John the *Baptist*.) The angel went on, “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even in the womb, and he will go forth in the power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. And so, make ready for the Lord a people prepared—which is what Advent is all about.

This is what prophets do: Turn our hearts to the welfare of our children—and all children. And teach us the wisdom of justice.

Zechariah could not take it all in “How can this be? My wife is no spring chicken, and I am a Romeo no more! I need a sign!” As if Gabriel standing before him was not!

The angel said, “I am Gabriel and I stand in the presence of the Lord”—which means so do you right now! I was sent to bring you good news. So, behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the days these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words.” His muteness was both judgment and salvation.

Elizabeth was given nine months of physical gestation, and Zechariah was given nine months of spiritual gestation: time to be quiet and ponder all that was happening, God's cat having gotten his tongue.

Sometimes God shuts our mouths. When we are too quick to doubt, other times when we are too sure we know what God is up to. These are two equal but opposite errors: too much doubt and too much certainty. The poet Yeats looked at his world and wrote:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Tillich once said that when we misuse God's name and speak too easily about God, God creates silence about himself. God stops speaking so that we can learn again to tell the difference between the sound of God's voice and the sound of our own. This is silence as judgment.

But silence can be our salvation too, our truest reverence. As the words of the fourth century Advent hymn: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence" Have you ever noticed how many Christmas carols speak of silence? "Silent Night." "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given" And in such a noisy season. Irenaeus, the second century theologian wrote: "Jesus Christ, his son, who is his word that proceeds from silence."

Sometimes our best preparation for the mystery of God and our truest response to the mystery of God is silence.

### III

The people outside the temple that day wondered what was going on. Why was Zechariah delayed? Had he been struck dead in the presence of the Lord? Tradition has it that when the high priest went into the holy of holies, they tied a rope around his ankle so that if he were struck dead in the presence of the Lord, they could haul him out without having to go in themselves.

When Zechariah finally appeared he, of course, could not speak, and so could not offer the priestly benediction. The text says that he “motioned” to them. Did he hold up his arms and try to mouth the benediction? Did he flap his arms like an angel’s wings to communicate what had happened? Did he rock an imaginary baby in his arms?

The text says that he went home and soon Elizabeth conceived. Did they dance a jig? Did she utter hallelujah for them both?

The joyful nine month journey to John’s birth had begun. Elizabeth’s belly began to grow and Zachariah silently pondered these things in his heart because that was the only way he could ponder them.

## IV

When John was born the neighbors and friends came to share their joy. Then came the eighth day, the day of his circumcision and naming.

The priest blessed the child and began to name him in the customary way: after his father Zechariah. But Elizabeth said, “No, name him John.”

The people said, “John!? This is highly irregular. No one in his family is named John.” Zechariah probably rolled his eyes, as if to say, “Everything about this child has been highly irregular!”

Then the crowd began making signs to Zechariah, assuming he was deaf as well as mute. “What do you the *father*, have to say about this matter?” Zechariah asked for a tablet and wrote, “His name is John!”

And as soon as he did he was able to speak again. And what he let loose of with his first words in nine months was a song. In Luke’s infancy narratives people are always breaking into song, like a Broadway musical: a little action, some dialogue, then comes a song. Luke as Rogers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, Lin Manuel Miranda.

“Blessed be the God of Israel”, he began, “for God has visited and redeemed God’s people.” Here is salvation as God delivering people from slavery, exile and oppression. A this-worldly salvation.

Then he turned to infant John and said:

And you child will be called prophet of the Most High

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to God’s people in the forgiveness of their sins

Through the tender mercy of our God.

For the day shall dawn from on high

To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Zechariah had been pondering a lot those nine months, and now a song about redemption from oppression, God’s tender mercies, forgiveness and light into all our darkness.

## V

Now to the questions which will accompany us through Luke’s gospel.



1) Who am I? In this story and in God's story? 2) What is God calling me, calling us to be and to do? 3) Who is our neighbor God is calling us to love as we love ourselves?

*Who am I?* Zechariah in his doubt? Elizabeth in her joy? Both of them in their life-long faithfulness?

*What is God calling you to be and to do?* What new calling and new adventure is awaiting you? No matter your age. How can you join in God's salvation in the world, the work of justice, tender mercy, forgiveness and light into others' darkness?

*And who is your neighbor,* the one you can love, even this week? The hungry child, the immigrant, the one suffering depression, or in the shadow of death, the one who needs a tangible sign of God's tender mercy.

Emmet Till was a young black teenager from Chicago visiting his family in Mississippi, who in 1955 was brutally lynched in a public hanging for whistling at a white girl. As thousands passed by his body at his funeral in Chicago, his mother said, "I don't have one minute to hate. The rest of my life I'm working for justice."

Finally, perhaps we are all being called to cultivate silence this Advent season, to be like Zechariah, as we wait the birth of Christ, to find that place deep

within where as the psalmist says, “Deep calls unto deep.” Start with ten minutes a day alone, silent with before God. See how it grows.

The great black theologian, pastor, mystic Howard Thurmond once said, and I paraphrase:

There is within us all a great ocean,

And in that ocean there is an island,

And on that island there is a temple,

And in that temple there is an altar,

And on that altar burns an eternal flame

And when we reach that ocean and find that island and enter that temple and approach that altar, we will meet the eternal love of God, our sins are forgiven and our resolve is strengthened.

Let us begin that inward journey today as we prepare ourselves for Christ’s coming. “Let all mortal flesh keep silence.”

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1. See Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored* (N.Y.: HarperOne,2011).

2. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" Selected Poems and Four Plays"  
(N.Y.: Scribner's Paperback Library, 1996), p. 89.