

## **“Why We Are Mute”**

Luke 1:11-22

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3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

Last week we heard John the Baptist preaching in the desert. This morning we hear the prediction of John’s birth. This is part of Luke’s gospel that is not in the lectionary; you will rarely hear it on Sunday morning. These details of John’s impending birth are not mentioned in the other three gospels. As in much of Luke’s gospel, this account is filled with many references to the Old Testament.

We come upon the old priest Zechariah (whose name means ‘Yahweh remembers’). He is serving in the Temple. (We know also by way of background that he and his wife Elizabeth have been unable to bear children, and they are old, maybe 50 or 60 something).

Zechariah has drawn the straw to enter the Holy of Holies and light the sacrificial incense. Only one priest gets to do this. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime moment. The Most Holy Place in the Temple is a place of encounter with God. This is a very big deal for a very holy man. So the stage is set for something momentous. Let us together listen for God’s word. . .

**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 to the parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

Now let’s take a little trip in our imagination. I know it’s difficult because this is so far outside our experience, but let’s try. We have old Zechariah, minding his own business, just doing his job. When after all these years he finally makes it into the Holy of Holies, he comes face to face with Almighty God. Remember, this is a place of encounter. The angel may not be the Lord God Almighty, but he’s close. It doesn’t

matter that the angel says, “Don’t be scared!”--- Zechariah is afraid. Wouldn’t you be? We don’t often talk about direct messages from God, but it is possible. It happens, even today. When it happens, it’s frightening. It’s frightening because you can no longer deny God is real; you can no longer deny there are forces bigger than you, things outside your awareness. It’s terrifying because you begin to realize these things you said you believed are not just a bunch of words.

Zechariah is afraid not just because he sees the angel. It’s what the angel *tells him* that is truly terrifying. Old Zechariah has a lot to be skeptical about. First, there’s the very idea that he and Elizabeth can finally have a baby. Absurd! Then there’s all these predictions about what the baby is going to do. When God names the baby ahead of time, watch out! This baby is going to be a holy man, dedicated to God; lots of people are going to depend upon him, he’s going to be a prophet. There’s even hints of the long awaited Messiah, and this baby John (his name means “God is gracious”) is going to be part of it. Be careful what you ask God for, Old Zechariah, you just might get it, and then some. . .

Let’s continue to hear Luke’s gospel:

**Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this?” I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” The angel answered, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.**

Good news? Yes, the idea of a baby after all these years is wonderful but I am not so sure about the prophet and the greatness and the fulfillment of all these enormous things. It’s just too much. Too much pressure, too much responsibility. Not sure I believe it. Not sure I want to. I am a cautious man. I want proof.

Angel Gabriel replies, in the words of scripture:

**And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.**

**Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.**

Today we could explain all this away with one little word---stroke. Everyone knows the elderly are more at risk than the young. A stroke

can hit suddenly and can result in the inability to speak. That's what it probably was. No need to ascribe some supernatural element to it. Old Zechariah had a stroke.

At this time of year most people don't get into much of an argument with us about what we believe. We are not often challenged. In our culture people are pretty open about Christmas. Let's be honest: many people see Christmas as a quaint if unbelievable story of God being born in a stable in Bethlehem. Now let's be even more honest. Deep in our hearts, we sometimes think of it this way, too. Doubt creeps in and we wonder, "How can this be? How can we be sure?" Deep in our hearts, we long for proof, just like Zechariah.

The words that jumped off the page as I studied this scripture were the words about WHY ZECHARIAH WAS MUTE. And no, it wasn't a stroke. He couldn't speak **because he didn't believe God's word**. And I for one am willing to give this explanation a chance. Because it dawned on me in a flash---*this is us*. This is why we are mute. Because we don't believe God's word.

We have the living, breathing word of God given to us in scripture and we just keep looking for something more. And so we are mute.

We are mute when someone sends an email making fun of faith. We are mute when we are at a cocktail party and a new acquaintance asks how we could possibly be Christian in this day and age. That's if we even get around to talking about our faith. We are silent when asked to take action for what we believe in, because we simply do not have the time or energy to spare.

We are mute because we have rarely had to put into words what we believe. We are embarrassed to talk about our faith. We sometimes hold back from telling people what God means to us; how our church family helps us; the difference Christ has made in our life. We don't invite people to join us in worship; we can't pray out loud; we can't even admit that we pray at all for fear of looking like fools. We may as well have had a stroke, for all the talking we do about what God has done for us.

Often we are mute, but we need to talk. We need to talk with each other, both inside and outside the church. We need to share our faith *and our doubts*, with believers and non-believers. Yes, it's frightening. Yes, it's uncomfortable. Yes, it's that important.

I had a friend who once put it this way. You know when you see a really excellent movie, or read a really good book, the kind of movie or

book that changes the way you see things, even the way you live? You want to tell people about it! You tell your friends, “You really must see this movie, it’s unbelievable.” You might even drag them along with you when you see the movie a second time.

When you encounter something that good you *want* to share it. You can’t shut up. This is why we have to break out of our silence and open our mouths. Because what we have is so special, so life-changing, so important that we cannot keep it to ourselves.

Over the next year I challenge you to open your mouth, even if you’re afraid. Even when you are unsure. Even, sometimes, when you doubt. LHPC’s Vision Team has been brainstorming and praying for the future of our church. The Team challenges each one of us to bring someone to church *at least once a month over the coming year*. I am taking the challenge (and I don’t know very many people in Dallas outside this church!) I urge you to take it, too. It will mean you have to open your mouth. It may mean you have to expand your circle of acquaintances. You may have to talk to someone you just met, or to someone you barely know. Or even to someone you’d rather NOT come to church!

This should be pretty easy to do in the next couple of weeks as we have a wonderful musical service of Lessons and Carols at both 9 and 11 a.m. next week, and a beautiful Christmas Eve candlelight service at 6 p.m. the following week. It will be harder to do after the New Year sets in and we get further away from Christmas tolerance.

During this Season of Advent and Christmas, we, too, stand mute right alongside Zechariah. But we don’t have to.

I close by quoting the great theologian Karl Barth:

“In spite of Zechariah’s unbelief, he was still a herald of Advent, one who waited for God. Otherwise the angel would not have spoken with him. Nor would he have become the father of John the Baptist. When everything came to pass which he could not believe and could not express, then he was suddenly able to believe and speak. For God does not stand still when we come to a standstill but precedes us with his deeds and only waits so that we can follow. And so we will accept---even with all that we cannot say and with all that we have not yet heard---we are also heralds of Advent.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From Karl Barth, Lukas 1:5-23, Predigten 1917, pp. 423-431 of the original German version; translated by Robert J. Sherman.

In spite of Zechariah's unbelief, he was a herald of God. In spite of ours, we can be, too.

This is (I pray) the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**