

## Midweek Advent

*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

<sup>19</sup> *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. <sup>20</sup> 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."*

<sup>21</sup> *Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> 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.*

<sup>23</sup> *When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.*

*When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.*

<sup>59</sup> *On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."*

<sup>61</sup> *They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."*

<sup>62</sup> *Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. (Luke 1:18-24, 57-64)*

### Advent Silence

Sometimes I need a little quiet time. In fact, sometimes when things in my house get just a little too stressful, I joke to my wife that I'm going to find a monastery somewhere that has really good food, a good library and a great collection of movies and join it. Sometimes, she asks if she can come, too. Sometimes, little kids need a time out – they need time to stop and sit quietly and reflect on their actions and perhaps get their emotions under control. Sometimes, it's too quiet in my house. My wife used to be a stay home mom and I always got to eat lunch with her, but now she's joined the working world and my house is often quiet and a little lonely at lunch. What do you think of when you think of silence? Tonight as we use our midweek Advent service to prepare to welcome our Savior again, we want to consider the story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. We want to learn from his life and his **Advent silence**.

What was that silence, exactly? Did Zechariah need a little quiet time because his household had gotten too hectic? No. There was just him and his wife Elizabeth. They never had any children and now they were just old for that to happen. Was Zechariah's silence a case of it being too quiet? Did he lead a lonely life? Maybe. He and his wife had often prayed for children and it may well have seemed that God's refusal to grant that gift left an empty place in their lives. But it's probably closest to the truth to say that Zechariah's silence was a kind of divine time out. God decided that he needed an opportunity to stop and think about his attitude.

Zechariah was a priest. That means that he was descended from Aaron the brother of Moses. The descendants of Aaron had passed the priesthood down, from father to son, for 1500 years. But in Zechariah's case, the bloodline hit a dead end. Zechariah himself, however, remained a priest. When his division of the tribe was on duty, he had to be at the temple to help with sacrifices and purification rituals and lots of other functions. One day, he drew the lot to go into the Holy Place during a service and burn incense. While he was inside, the people were gathered outside, and they waited for him to come out and continue with whatever liturgy they were using. But he didn't come out.

He didn't come out because the angel Gabriel appeared to him inside the Holy Place. Gabriel told Zechariah that God had heard the prayers that he and Elizabeth had offered and God would now grant those prayers. Elizabeth would become pregnant and give birth to a son. But based on Zechariah's response, you have to wonder how old those prayers really were. Zechariah asked, "**How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.**" Gabriel called that unbelief. If Zechariah didn't believe the promise, you have to wonder if he hadn't given up on praying for a son, years ago already. But God hadn't forgotten the prayer. He answered in his own time and in the way that benefited the world the most.

Yet, Zechariah didn't believe the answer. He had been waiting so long that somewhere along the line, if he was still even offering that prayer, he didn't think it was going to happen anymore. And can we really blame him? Zechariah and Elizabeth lived long before anyone ever thought of fertility treatments and pregnancy clinics. I think if Gabriel were to come to me and my wife already now in our middle age and tell us we were going to have another child, we might just ask for something to back that statement up, too. Zechariah and Elizabeth were probably way past where we are.

But God didn't look at it that way. Gabriel said, **"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. 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."** What did Zechariah's silence mean? It was a nine to ten month long time out for Zechariah because he didn't believe Gabriel's words. Was this an overreaction on God's part?

Not at all. First of all, this wasn't just some regular guy. It was the angel Gabriel. This wasn't a rerun of *It's a Wonderful Life* in which the angel looks like a regular guy and has to prove he's an angel. Zechariah was terrified when Gabriel first appeared. He knew he was an angel. And Zechariah should've known that meant that he had a message from God. But it's even worse than that. Gabriel was sent to announce the good news. He told Zechariah that his son was going to be the prophet who would announce the arrival of the Savior. The good news – the gospel – has the very power of God built into it. Zechariah had to resist God's message and God's power in order to disbelieve what Gabriel said. That was simply sin.

But it's hard for me not to feel sympathy for Zechariah because disbelieving God's promises and resisting his gospel is the default setting of the human heart. Even we believers fall into it sometimes, especially when it seems like our prayers haven't been answered, at least not the way that we wanted them to be. Sometimes, we can give up on God. Worse, sometimes, we go through the motions and pray because that's what we're supposed to do – but we don't really expect God to answer. What is that, but a lack of faith in God's promises?

But Zechariah shows us how God deals with us weak and sinful believers as we struggle with the way he answers our prayers and rules over our lives while we wait to see Jesus again. God disciplined Zechariah to call him to repent. This silence was not punishment, at least not in the strict sense of the word. There is a difference between punishment and discipline. Strictly speaking, punishment is about justice. Hell is punishment. It's what the devil and all sinners deserve from a holy God. In this world, the death penalty is punishment. We don't hope to reform the criminal anymore. We're just giving him or her what they have coming.

Discipline is different. It's about teaching. Most of the time, we parents don't make our kids pay for their crimes. We try to teach them what a Christian life looks like and mold their attitudes so that they reflect the kind of mindset God wants from his people. God did not punish Zechariah. God never punishes believers. But God does sometimes let us face the consequences of our sins to teach us a lesson. If I get hammered on New Year's Eve and then I wrap my car around a tree, there are going to be consequences. I'm going to lose my driver's license. My insurance company might not pay for the car. I'm probably going to spend at least some time in jail and find it very difficult to continue to be your pastor. But none of those things is punishment, because that sin deserves far worse. It deserves death and then hell. Even if I die in the car crash, I'm not going to hell. Jesus took my sins away. I will live with him forever.

So consequences are discipline that God uses to teach us to live a more Christian life. Quite frankly, God would prefer that we learn the lesson without him having to spank us. But our sinful flesh is strong and sometimes, we need harsh measures. God loves us enough to preserve our faith and our eternal life, even if it means he has to make part of this life hard. God silenced Zechariah to teach him to trust his word and his promises. He did not send Zechariah to hell. But he did make him sit in silence and contemplate his sin for the better part of a year so he could repent of his failure to trust in this special measure of God's love.

God may do the same for us. He probably won't take away our power of speech. But as we wrestle with the disappointments and hurts that go with life in this world and begin to question whether God is really listening to our prayers, our Father in heaven disciplines us. He calls us to repent – to recognize that those attitudes are sinful. Our weakness and lack of faith deserve his punishment. But then he reminds us who is really listening to us: Jesus our Savior. The same Jesus that John the Baptist came to proclaim. The same Jesus who was born in a stable and laid in a manger. The same Jesus who held all the fullness of God hidden in his

infant body. That Jesus never heard a gospel promise that he didn't cling to. That Jesus never offered a prayer without full and complete trust in God to hear it. Jesus was perfect in his faith in our place. God calls us perfect because Jesus was. And Jesus died and paid for all our failures to trust that God is listening and answering our prayers in the way that is best for us. Jesus died and paid for all our sins. He rose to say they are washed away forever. God has forgiven us. God receives every one of our prayers as if Jesus himself had offered it. And Jesus sits with the Father and intercedes for us when we pray. He speaks on our behalf.

Advent reminds us that God does indeed keep his promises. Zechariah's silence is a call for us to repent of our weakness and sin. But repentance is not only about feeling bad and admitting our sin. There is a much more important part. Repentance is about trusting that Jesus did all those things and that God has forgiven us for Jesus' sake. Zechariah shows that, too, when his silence ended.

Gabriel told Zechariah to name his son John. But no one in Zechariah's family had that name. Zechariah finished his service at the temple, even though he couldn't speak. He went home and promptly got his wife pregnant and nine months later, the baby was born. On the day of his circumcision, the whole family gathered to celebrate this unexpected blessing. You can imagine nieces and nephews maybe even grand-nieces and grand-nephews gathering to celebrate Uncle Zechariah and Aunt Elizabeth's baby. They wanted to name the baby after Uncle Zechariah – after all, they didn't expect another chance to do that!

But Elizabeth said no. She wanted to name the baby John. You have to wonder how she knew to name him that. But she was prepared to stand on God's Word. The family was kind of put off. So they went to the person with legal authority – to Zechariah – and they engaged in some sign language to ask what he wanted to name the child. Apparently, he couldn't hear either. But once he knew what they wanted, he wrote down the answer: **“His name is John.”** With those words, Zechariah showed his repentance and faith. He showed that he understood the power and the grace of God and he accepted all the promises that Gabriel had made about this child – promises that Zechariah and Elizabeth almost certainly would not live to see fulfilled. Then God opened Zechariah's mouth and he sang God's praises.

My friends, life rarely ends when we sin. Because we have a gracious God, he gives us the opportunity to repent. He gives us the chance to reflect on our sin and to trust in our Savior. Sometimes, when we have not trusted in God – when God works in a way that is different from what we want, we need a little quiet time to consider his love and our stubbornness. Our God does what is best for us even then. When we have been ungrateful, spoiled little brats, he still loves us and forgives for Jesus' sake. That's why we spend these four weeks before Christmas building up to that holiday: it is the celebration of God's forgiving love moving heaven and earth to save us. That Child who was born in Bethlehem comes again to our hearts through the gospel and he teaches us to trust in his forgiveness. And he gives us peace no matter how spoiled and ungrateful we have been. Trust in him and be at peace. Amen.