

Swords Into Plowshares: Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:67-79

We are focusing in these four weeks of Advent on the songs that Luke felt compelled to insert into his story of Jesus. Right in the first four chapters of Luke's Gospel, four songs that capture something so meaningful for this storyteller that he interrupts his orderly, journalistic account to put *music* in there.

You know how in musical theater, it's all about the songs? The play includes just enough dialogue to make the critical connections from one piece of music to the other. In this kind of literature it's the opposite. Luke's story of Jesus is told in prose. Music is not the form of it. That's why these songs ought to stop us. They're in the Gospel because they signal something that Luke couldn't express any other way. We will miss Luke's point if we don't stop and notice that *this* encounter is expressed in a song.

We started last week with the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of hope as the angel's announcement of her pregnancy slowly, tentatively, begins to sound like good news. Today we go back to a character who appears even before Mary does in Luke's Gospel: Zechariah.

Zechariah is an old man. He's related to Jesus, but distantly, by marriage. Which is a little like starting your story with the husband of your maternal second cousin, once removed—someone you barely know. Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist. John we know. But something important—important enough to make it Luke's *first* story—happens even before the birth of John the Baptist.

I wonder if by telling us this story first, Luke is underlining for us, highlighting, how normal everything seemed before Jesus' story began. How much the birth of the Messiah was like God breaking in to a world that had gotten used to living without God's presence. To people who had as much trouble as we do holding onto holiness.

Zechariah is a priest. Priest-ing was like a civil service job, and he's been doing it for a long time. Long enough that he's forgotten that this work once felt mystical and exhilarating. When he was young, he'd hoped that somewhere in the chanting and the incense and the rituals, there would be magical moments that would sweep him into feeling like he was in the presence of God. But he knows now: those moments happen rarely. So now Zechariah is just going through the motions, doing what he knows how to do, not even wondering any more whether this is the right job for him, or whether there might be some deeper purpose for his life that he hasn't figured out yet.

Zechariah knows exactly what he will find when he goes home tonight, too. Elizabeth, his wife, will have the same-as-usual dinner on the table. Elizabeth used to be a beauty, but she and Zechariah are long past the point of mustering up excitement about each other. Elizabeth too has been worn down by her life. For decades they had wanted a family. They tried to get pregnant, visited doctors and psychics for advice, fended off suggestions from neighbors and family members who thought they were being helpful. But nothing happened. And so, silently, without ever talking about their disappointment, Zechariah and Elizabeth just let that hope die inside of them.

On the day this story begins, Zechariah is in the very center space of the Temple, a room reserved for offering incense to carry the prayers of the people directly to God. This ritual was supposed to be so quiet, dark, intensely focused. Only one priest at a time, once a year, was designated to do it, so that no one could mess up its holiness. The Holy of Holies, this space where Zechariah stood, was the Temple's most sacred spot, which meant it was the holiest place on earth.

As he entered the space that morning, Zechariah felt...nothing. Maybe he stifled a yawn. He was there because it was his turn. Do you know that feeling? It's a non-feeling, actually: numbness. Even in the middle of something that's supposed to be powerful and moving, it's like a thick, heavy blanket is sitting on top of your head. It's hard to look up, much less feel some spiritual connection.

So on this morning Zechariah just does what he's supposed to do; he goes through the motions. He'd memorized the words. He knows how to light the candles and sprinkle the incense. He chants the hymns he'd sung a thousand times before. His mind wanders. He remembers he needs to stop at the grocery store on his way home to pick up orange juice.

And then, something happens. In that space that is dark and mysterious and intentionally isolated from anyone outside, where there was supposed to be no one there but him, Zechariah feels a presence beside him. Maybe he even sees something move; he isn't sure. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah" says a voice that might be an angel. "God has heard your prayers, all of them. Even the ones that have not been answered." And it's true: Zechariah and Elizabeth *had* prayed, for *years*, for a child. So long, that they had finally stopped praying. Maybe even stopped believing that anyone heard those prayers.

The angel keeps going: "Your wife Elizabeth will have a son. He will be a different sort of child, special, a blessing not only to you but to the whole world. His name will be John." Nice. This is already a good daydream. But Zechariah has become a practical man. 'I'm old,' he says back to the angel. 'Elizabeth is old. We've been disappointed before. I don't know who you are or where you've been all these years, but I'm not sure I want to invest myself again in some feel-good promise that's not likely to go anywhere.'

That was Zechariah's fear speaking. Fear of being disappointed one more time. Even in the Temple—the holiest place on earth—with something that might be an angel standing right in front of him, Zechariah is afraid of too much hope. He knows the truth about himself: that he is an old, childless man, half of a barren couple. This angel was trying to revive a dream that long ago Zechariah had learned to stop dreaming.

I get Zechariah's first reaction to the angel; don't you? Long before we reach old age, our identity gets pretty well set. We figure it out: this is who I am; this is what my life is going to be. For some of us, pride inflates our self-image a bit; we're waiting for other people to see in us the great things we know about ourselves. For others of us, shame makes us smaller. It convinces us that attention is likely to reveal something we'd do better to keep hidden. And maybe most of us carry some messy mix of both pride *and* shame. I too am Zechariah: waiting for my potential to be noticed. And then, when God calls me to live larger, I argue that I'm not the right person.

Here the story takes a fascinating, and confusing, turn. When Zechariah finishes talking, saying to the angel what sounds like, ‘Excuse me, sir, but I think you must be mistaken,’ the angel strikes him mute. Zechariah will not be able to speak or hear for nine months—the exact length of time it will take for a baby to be born. For the full term of his wife’s surprising pregnancy, Zechariah carries an iPad around with him so that he can communicate. When people want to get his attention, they have to wave their arms in front of his face.

If you’ve heard this story before, maybe you’ve wondered, as I have, why that angel was so harsh with Zechariah. It shouldn’t be a sin to doubt, to be realistic! There are other stories of people in the Bible who said much cheekier things to God than what Zechariah said to that angel.

But what if the silence the angel installed around Zechariah wasn’t punishment, but a strange sort of blessing? What if Zechariah was being invited into nine months as a silent observer of a miracle? A miracle that would take time to take shape, a miracle he might wreck if he kept talking about why it couldn’t be true. What if the silence imposed on him was a gift? What if silence brought Zechariah what he most needed, which was just to sit with the angel’s words?

The angel’s first words to Zechariah were ‘Do not be afraid.’ The angel’s last words: ‘His name will be John.’ John, which means in the language Zechariah spoke, *God is gracious*.

Do not be afraid... God is gracious.

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, to see that what you have believed about yourself, what you are sure you know, what you expect of your life, is too small to hold God’s dream for you.

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, to imagine that holiness, something kind of like an angel, can find you, even when you are not looking up.

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, to hope that even an old, tired person like you, too accustomed to the reality of your life to expect anything more, can bring something holy to birth.

*Do not be afraid. Even after you stopped hoping, your used-up, stagnant, discontented, not-enough life can give birth to something called *God is gracious*.*

There are nine months of silence. And then Zechariah and Elizabeth’s child is born. His father names him. John: *God is gracious*. And suddenly, Zechariah can speak again. He has been silent for so long that when he opens his mouth again, words come flying out. They are a song.

*God has rescued us...
so that we could serve him without fear...for as long as we live.*

*Because of our God’s deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide us on the path of peace.*

This is what Luke wants us to hear: even the most despairing, unwilling, fearful silence can end in a song. A man trapped in his own hopelessness is freed by waiting in silence. The gift that changes everything sometimes comes in what looks like punishment. It begins—it always begins—with a voice that says ‘*Do not be afraid...God is gracious.*’