



University Christian Church – Austin

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How Silently, How Silentlyⁱ

Advent 4, c, Dec. 20, 2009

Luke 1: 39-55

I suppose a kind of confession of infatuation is in order. One's state of mind and heart colors a host of perceptions. So if Christmas is all about the birth of a baby, this is also a uniquely exciting time in the Kutz-Marks family because of the coming of another precious child. Having just returned from New York City where we first beheld our then 10 day old grand daughter, Arcadia Snow Kutz-Marks, we are on a kind of emotional high that we've never experienced before that brings with it its own set of very rose-colored glasses.... coming to this morning's Scripture lesson.

Now let me point out, there is a strange oddity in the lectionary that our church along with almost all mainline Protestant congregations follow. The oddity is that the story that begins the Gospel of Luke is never read in the lectionary's 3 year cycle of readings around which our worship life develops. Oh, we have the story of the Magnificatⁱⁱ just read that shows Mary singing the joyful liberation that God is promising through the child she shall bear, but we don't really have the background to understand who this cousin Elizabeth is that shares with Mary the story we have just heard. And that's too bad, because if you open your Bible to

the beginning of the Gospel of Luke you have it all laid out there for you in some detail. It's the story of the Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were both righteous Jews from an important family line in the nation of Israel. They were both descendants of Aaron. That meant that as members of a priestly family the Aaronic men would take a turn serving in the great Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah would serve by actually performing priestly duties in the Temple and Elizabeth's job in life was to produce children, more little descendants of Aaron. The problem was- as much as she ached to become a mother- she was unable to become pregnant and as the years passed, then also came the added pressure on them because they both were, as the scripture says euphemistically, “advanced in years.”

Now, bearing children was such an important function in those days that according to the laws of the time Zechariah could have legally and legitimately divorced Elizabeth for her inability to produce children. But Luke says he decided not to do so. Are you hearing a refrain of Joseph's planning to divorce Mary?

Well, it came time for Zechariah to take his week long tour of duty in the Temple in Jerusalem. In those days a kind of rolling of the dice was used in order to determine who would get which role in those priestly duties. Zechariah had the lucky roll. He alone would be allowed to enter into the innermost sanctuary of the temple and burn incense on the altar. It was understood that the smoke of the incense carried with it the prayers of the people - who would be gathered outside this holy place – up to God in heaven . The plan was for Zechariah to conclude his time in the Temple by coming out before the people and offering a spoken benediction, representing the presence of God to the people.

You've got to understand what a wonderful opportunity this was for Zechariah! It was literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, because no priest was ever allowed to perform this special duty twice. So Zechariah was diligently performing his duties in the Temple of lighting the incense..... when an angel appeared to him and told him that his prayer would be answered.

Prayer? What prayer? How did this angel know the prayer in his heart was to have a child? But the angel had it right. That was certainly Zechariah's deep prayer. And in this revelation Zechariah was even given the name of the child to be, John, whom we would come to know as John the Baptist.

Now here is where this story gets so tricky. From my youth I remember this story being told in such a way that Zechariah's own faithfulness was found wanting because he asked this next question. "How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." That's a reasonable question if you ask me.

The Angels answer is telling, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

OK, because Zechariah didn't immediately believe what the angel Gabriel announced, he would be made mute until the child was born, as a kind of punishment for not believing.

Don't you feel a little sympathy for Zechariah? After all, if you had yearned and ached for a child for decades; if you had been disappointed at every turn at this

most important function in that society of producing progeny; couldn't you expect that he'd be a little questioning? Personally, I'd be ready to cut the guy some slack.

Think about it. Was his question really much different from the way Mary would respond to the same angel's similar announcement a few verses later, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" But in any case, that is how this story goes.

So Zechariah emerges from the Temple unable to speak. It was clear to the people who had gathered there that something powerful had taken place, that he had received a revelation of some sort, but being unable to speak he could not communicate with them. Moreover, Zechariah could not offer them the spoken benediction that he was expected to offer, so he silently finished his service there at the Temple as best he could and returned to his home.

Then today's lesson will return our focus to Mary and the baby she was to be carrying; to Elizabeth and the baby she was already carrying; to Mary's faithful, prophetic Magnificat response to her angelic visitation: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." It IS glorious.

But perhaps it is because I am father to a son who has just become a father - that my mind lingers with Zechariah, the man overwhelmed at the thought of really, finally having his long-dreamed-of child. And I think if we keep our eyes on Zechariah we can see a lot of ourselves, and also of our sisters and brothers here at church. I do not say this because we have been silenced by a revelation as Zechariah was, but because like Zechariah we have waited a long time for fulfillment of our prayers.

We have waited a long time for the coming of the kingdom of God that we find so very central to the teaching and the mission of Jesus. And though we have been told repeatedly that the day of the powerful arrival of that kingdom is coming -- it has been so long in coming -- that perhaps we can be forgiven if we ask for a sign, for some semblance, some tantalizing scent of that kingdom come. We will say it again today as we gather around a table of communion, "we remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection..... we await his coming in glory."

"We await his coming in glory." How long must we wait for this coming in glory? Faithful ones near us will answer: be patient, trust in God, and, of course, we will try. Yet we all know former Christians who have been worn down to the bone in their waiting and have finally given up and entered the growing ranks of those for whom faith is something they once had but do not have anymore. It is a skeptical age within which we live and the easy path is to give in and to give up. But let me suggest another path, one indicated by the silence enforced upon Zechariah, the father of the forerunner of Jesus. ⁱⁱⁱ

It will be no surprise to you to hear me say that the onslaught of information we endure in this society is having a corrosive effect upon the building of solid spiritual foundations. There is so much of everything coming at us so fast that - more than almost anything else - what we need is a way to turn it down; to turn it off for a while; to listen for another voice, a rarer voice, perhaps even an angelic voice. Few have learned how to do so.

Let me suggest that a path we might choose is to follow the experience of Zechariah into a long, disciplined, inner silence..... wherein we give up trying to answer every question that comes at us or wells up from within us. As the third

verse of our Hymn of Invitation will soon remind us, Silence is the nursery of every holy birth. “How Silently, How Silently, the wondrous gift in giv'n.”

What we receive of great value comes to us as GIFT.... freely given GIFT in the silence. I suggest we give up trying to control and to make everything happen the way we think it should be.....and begin to trust God's power to provide what is needful.

Consider what would happen if we stop pretending we know all the answers to “why” and to “how” God works in the world..... and, instead, started looking for the oh so subtle signs of the divine work all around us at every moment.

I just saw one in New York. She is a beautiful child. She is a miracle, a sign pointing so clearly to God. There's plenty that her parents, David and Christine, have to do in order to keep tiny Arcadia well, but that miracle that she is is certainly nothing that David or Christine or any other mortal could fashion. Really, think of it. Is there anything more indicative of God's love than the miracle gift of a child?

God's ways are so far above our own that a reverential silence, a sincere humility before this Mystery is called for. In a court of law we promise to tell “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” but when it comes to talking about God we sometimes go on saying more than we really know;

taking our own experience and inferences; or

our understanding of Scripture, or

some favorite logical explanation...

we take these as the rule by which reality must unfold. Like Zechariah before Gabriel, a little humility please!

Though she is as yet inarticulate and barely able to express her needs, I have every hope that someday soon our little Arcadia miracle will be pulling up on her grandfather's leg and then crawling up into her grandfather's lap, asking me to read a story or give her a toy or comfort her when something is not going just right in her world. That is the kind of thing that we have come to expect from our parents and our grandparents.

But if you listen carefully to the way that people talk about God, that often has that very same character, doesn't it,? With Jesus pointing the way by calling God, "Daddy," "Abba," we so often approach God as a kindly, generous patron, who above all else, loves all. It is this aspect that allows us to properly call God "good," because through it we know God cares.

But while it is proper to sense God as close and caring, we're off course if our sense of God doesn't also include this profound otherness, this so -- far -- beyond -- us-ness, that we dare not paper over either. God is God and we are not. As the famed phenomenologist Rudolf Otto called it, *mysterium tremendum*, the humbling of the soul in face that which it can never comprehend nor withstand.

The truth of the matter is that if we aren't willing to sit in that awe-filled silence as did Zechariah struck mute, and consider what God is doing; if we aren't as did Mary.... ready to push aside all the other calls upon us.... and ponder these things in our hearts, then Christ might be born a thousand times in as many humble stables and it won't matter to us a bit.... because -- like most of the residents of Bethlehem, we'll never attend to it.

You see, though the physical birth of a child moves relentlessly from conception towards birth, the spiritual birth of any one of us is far from automatic. At any time we can stultify growth, we can freeze the spiritual progression, by simply busying ourselves, by not attending.

Silently, “how silently, the wondrous gift is giv'n.” My Advent prayer is that we each will make room in our lives for that birth, the one that can make all things New.

i A reference to “O Little Town of Bethlehem”, specifically the verse that goes:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n;
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav'n.
 No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
 Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

ii <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnificat>

iii Much of this sermon's thrust is indebted to “The Silence of Angels” in the book *Bread of Angels* by Barbara Brown Taylor.