

How will I know?
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Luke 1:5-25

Our passage begins with these words:

“In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah.”
That introductory phrase is important because “the days of King Herod of Judea”
were pretty bad.

“Israel had languished in exile
and under foreign rule of varying degrees of ruthlessness for centuries.”¹

At this point in the story they are, of course, ruled by the Roman Empire.

Herod, as we discussed recently, was a brutal tyrant who killed
his own offspring to keep them from the throne.

There was “great economic instability and imbalance....

Economic exploitation made daily existence a life-and-death struggle.

[It was a time] of weariness, injustice, disease, and economic desperation.”²

“In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah.”

Actually, in those days there were lots of priests.

Every direct male descendant of Aaron was a priest,

which meant primarily one thing:

there were way too many priests!

They were divided into 24 sections, or orders,

and each order would serve in the temple for one week twice a year.

One of their primary jobs was to offer the incense

and pray the daily prayers with the people,

and only one person was chosen each day to perform this most sacred task.

So when each order gathered in Jerusalem,

they separated out those who had already served in this capacity,

and then they cast lots to see who was called by God that day.

Each order had 800 to 1000 men, so some men—many men—

would serve their whole lives as priests and never be chosen.

And the lot had never fallen on Zechariah.

¹ James Hanson <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/zechariahs-song/commentary-on-luke-15-13-57-80>

² Ibid.

He had been waiting his whole adult life to serve in the temple,
to fulfill the calling defined by his lineage and his desire,
and that honor had eluded him.

I wonder if he questioned why.

Did God not consider him worthy?
Was he somehow lacking, not faithful enough?
He was running out of time and still waiting.

That's not all Zechariah was waiting for.

Zechariah had also been waiting throughout his marriage
for him and his wife to be blessed with a child.

At that time marriages without children were never by choice.

A woman unable to have children was sometimes the object of ridicule,
and always the object of pity.

After all, a woman's purpose was to be a wife and mother.

Although men were not blamed for the lack of a child—
it was women who bore that burden—

still Zechariah would have no progeny to continue the line,
no son to prepare for serving as a priest.

I wonder if he questioned why.

Did God not consider him and Elizabeth worthy?
Were they somehow lacking, not faithful enough?

But by the time our story is told, Zechariah was an old man
and Elizabeth was way past child-bearing years.

And then it happened: it was Zechariah's time to serve, and the lot fell on him.

He had to have been thrilled—ecstatic—at the opportunity.

Imagine it with me.

He enters the temple filled with joy, ready to serve God,
ready to make the incense offerings and pray the prayers of the people,
the duties he has been waiting a lifetime to fulfill.

It is just like he imagined—until he sees an angel standing by the altar.

Nobody told him about an angel.

There isn't supposed to be an angel.

And this isn't one of those chubby little cherubs
we see in Renaissance paintings.

The angel Gabriel stands there in all his heavenly glory—and awesomeness. He says, “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. . . .

He will be great in the sight of Yahweh. . . .

He will turn many of the people of Israel to their God . . .
to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Now, Zechariah knows the Torah.

He knows the stories of his people.

So he knows about Abraham and Sara,
and how an angel promised them a child late in life,
and that Sara laughed and the angel didn’t like it.

So when an angel tells him that his wife—who is considered “barren”—
would bear a child this late in life, he does not laugh.

At least not out loud.

But he can’t stop himself from asking one question:

“How will I know that this is so?”

You might be thinking that’s an odd question.

“Well, you’ll know when your old wife is suddenly with child.”

But you see, because he knows his Torah,

he also knows that it was a long time between promise and fulfillment,
a long time between when God made that the promise to Abraham,
and when it came to be.

So he does not assume this will happen immediately.

An angel saying “Your wife will bear you a son,”
does not cause Zechariah to run home and order the baby crib!

So when he asks, “How will I know this is so?”

I think he meant, “How will I know in-between?”

How will I know, when it doesn’t happen right away?

How will I know that you still mean it when,
five years down the road,
we are still without child?

How will I keep believing?

How will I *still* know?”

It’s a good question, a valid question,
and it’s a question we ask, too.

How will I know God is with me when I feel alone?

How will I know prayer is worthwhile if the outcome isn't assured?
 How will I keep believing that peace is possible when all I see is conflict?
 How will I keep believing that justice is attainable when I see so much greed,
 inequality, and bigotry?
 How will I know that love will win,
 when hate always seems to have the upper hand?

Apparently Gabriel did not like the question,
 for we are told that the angel punished Zechariah for it
 by making him mute, unable to speak, until after the child was born.

Frankly, I'm on Zechariah's side here.

First because it's a valid question,
 and second because the punishment doesn't make sense.

Zechariah's calling had finally been validated
 by being chosen to offer the prayers—
 and the one thing he needed to speak those prayers was a VOICE!

Why would he be silenced when his calling had finally been fulfilled?
 Why would his voice be taken away when he finally got a chance to use it?
 Why would he be silenced?

I'm guessing some of you know what it's like to be silenced.

 You had your voice taken away,
 or it took you forever to find it in the first place.

 Or you traded it away for something you thought was more valuable,
 like a relationship that required you to hold your tongue.

Others silenced you, or maybe you silenced yourself for fear of rocking the boat
 or fear of failing.

So you may join me in being a bit miffed by Zechariah losing his voice
 just when he needed it.

Why was he unable to fulfill his calling on the very day
 that he finally got a chance to fulfill his calling?

Well, I don't know—I have no way of knowing for sure—
 but I think maybe it's because his calling wasn't what he thought it was.

Sure, he was called to be a priest by birth.

But he had a higher calling, too—
 a calling that superseded his calling to lead the prayers.

His calling was something else he thought had been denied him.
His calling was to father a child, a particular child,
to bring light into “those days of king Herod”
when life was hard and injustice was rampant.
When he lost his ability to speak, the true priority became clear.
His primary responsibility was to father the child who would prepare the way
for the Messiah.

I think sometimes we get confused by this in our own lives.
We think we’re supposed to be doing this –
this job, this career, this ministry, this relationship,
this whatever-it-is-that-we-think-is-most-important.
Then something happens to take that away,
and we’re confused and frightened and sometimes downright furious.
Why am I not allowed to serve?
Why am I being silenced?
Why didn’t I get that job?
Why am I still alone?

What we don’t realize is that sometimes there’s another calling.
There’s another purpose we are to fulfill.
We probably won’t get an angel to tell us what it is,
to tell us we’re going to bring new life into the world.
We have to wait those metaphorical nine months
before we give birth to what’s new,
and metaphorical months can be way longer than real ones.
And we won’t get it if we don’t stop to listen.

Zechariah didn’t speak for at least nine months,
and maybe much longer if Elizabeth didn’t get pregnant right away.
But when he did, he sure found his voice.
He spoke some of the most beautiful words in the Second Testament,
and he spoke them to his son:
“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before God to prepare the way,
to give knowledge of salvation to God’s people by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

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

I wish I could look at you and speak to you
the way Zechariah did to John.

I wish I could look at those of you who've lost your direction, and say,

“And you, child, will be called . . . the one who is found.”

Or for those who feel all your grand adventures are behind you,

“And you, child, will be called . . . the one who dared to dream again.”

To those of you carrying wounds from the past, I want to say to you,

“And you, child, will be called . . . the healer of yesterday's pain.”

I want to look at you all and say,

“And you, child, will be called . . . the bearer of peace.”

Zechariah's message is a message for us all,

for aren't we all supposed to prepare the way of Jesus?

Aren't we all supposed to point people toward God?

Aren't we all supposed to give light to those who sit in darkness

and guide one another's feet in the way of peace?

How will we know?

We know because we choose to believe so that we can help make it so.

We know because we are called.

You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

And you, child, will go before the Lord to prepare God's ways.

And you, child, will bring light to those in darkness.

And you, child, will be called

And you, child, will be called

And you, child, and you, child, and you, child, will be called.

to believe and keep believing,

to keep preparing the way of peace.