

**Luke 1:5-13 [14-25] 57-80**

<sup>5</sup>In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. <sup>8</sup>Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>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. [<sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” <sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” <sup>19</sup>The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” <sup>21</sup>Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup>When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup>When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. <sup>24</sup>After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup>“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”] <sup>57</sup>Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup>Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. <sup>59</sup>On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. <sup>60</sup>But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” <sup>61</sup>They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” <sup>62</sup>Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. <sup>63</sup>He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. <sup>64</sup>Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup>Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. <sup>66</sup>All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. <sup>67</sup>Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: <sup>68</sup>“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. <sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. <sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” <sup>80</sup>The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

**Sermon – Listening and Singing**

I have a friend named Emmanuel—and no, I’m not kidding because it’s almost Christmas and Emmanuel is another name for Jesus. I have a friend whose name is actually Emmanuel. Emmanuel is a pastor who has recently earned his Ph.D. in Music

Education. Currently, you can meet him over at St. John's, across the river, where he works with youth and families.

While Emmanuel was working on his dissertation, he taught me a lot about music and cultural understanding. Emmanuel and his family are from Tanzania, and his dissertation involves work on colonization, westernization, and understandings of what music—*is*—depending on where you're *from*.

Though *he* could speak as an expert on the topic, he has explained to me about how Tanzanian music is functional or communal, but rarely ever performative. "People sing functionally," he told me, "when they're hand tilling a field to stay on the same beat and keep in sync with the work." "In church, when you see a choir singing in Tanzania" he said, "it's communal. If you see people sitting down on the benches watching the choir, they're not watching the choir perform," he explained to me, "it's because they're taking a break from the singing—maybe because they're older and can't stand for long periods of time, or maybe because they have a baby to feed. People singing together is not about singing well, or on pitch," he told me, "the importance is placed on people contributing their voices to put something forth *together*. Collectively." It's not about being a *good* choir, it's about giving a bit of yourself to the community by lending your voice. It's about creating a new thing communally.

That understanding has been on my mind this week, as I think of Zechariah's song in our scripture.

Zechariah was a temple priest. His job was to preserve and convey the stories of God with the people. To keep telling the stories of God providing a way when there was no way; of God's abiding presence when the people were wandering or lost; of God's call for justice through the voices of the prophets; of God's mercy and grace even in the midst of suffering, destruction and death. In short, Zechariah was charged with keeping the faith going. He was to "cherish old memories and imaginations, and keep alive the rumor of hope" (NT Wright). Zechariah was part of a priestly order that serves in the temple only 2 weeks out of the year. This story takes place during that 2-week time in the big Jerusalem temple.

After drawing straws with the other priests, Zechariah gets to be the priest to go to the holiest part of the temple. While he's there, the angel Gabriel appears to him. For years, the scripture tells us, Zechariah prayed for a child, but that hadn't happened for him and Elizabeth. And they were getting older. They'd had a good life, but no children. By this point, they imagined that it just wouldn't happen for them. Despite praying years on end, they'd given up on that, because the door of hope seemed to be closing for them as they aged.

But the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth are going to be parents! And—he doesn't believe the angel. As a person who prayed for decades for something he didn't yet have, we can imagine that Zechariah had pondered [both] hope and *agony* for many years (NT Wright).

So when the Gabriel tells Zechariah he's going to be a parent, and not just a parent, but have a child who will play a *great* part in God's story, it's *not* out of the question that Zechariah doesn't believe it. After years of disappointment, would any of us be so willing to get our hopes up again?

Fear overwhelmed him, we're told. He asked Gabriel, "*how will I know* when this has happened?" It's incomprehensible for him, despite the fact that he'd prayed for this for this exact thing. Gabriel, not pleased at being challenged by a high priest and told it was impossible, struck Zechariah speechless. Zechariah was silenced.

*Now—side note—I know this might feel problematic that an angel of God was having such a bad day that they struck someone silent for their disbelief, even if it was a temple priest. This seems to go against what we know of God's character, and I make no excuses for it. We can simply hold this as a point and name it problematic if that's the case. Even as we steep in the stories of our faith, It's okay, too, to name them uncomfortable. It means we're engaging our faith, and that we care.*

So, Zechariah was silent. For more than 9 months. For more than 9 months, Zechariah couldn't hear the sound of his own voice. But he could listen to those around him. He could listen for the Spirit within.

Those of you who do contemplative prayer, or the 15 minutes of Advent quiet in the sanctuary after worship—you who sit in silence no matter what is around you—might have a better idea of Zechariah's experience. Of course the difference is that you are choosing the quiet, and Zechariah didn't.

What would it be like, I wonder for him to live in that silence? To not be able to give voice to your own will? To be a priest, a respected leader, silenced? What did the silence do to him? To his fear? To his ego? To his spirit? To his inability to voice his own thoughts? What did it do to his work as a priest? We can only speculate.

What we do know, is that when the baby is born, Elizabeth says he's to be named John, as the angel had instructed. The name John means, "God is gracious." "Are you sure?" people ask her, noting that this name isn't after anyone in her family. They look to Zechariah, and he writes on a tablet to confirm what Elizabeth reported.

And it's at *that* moment, he's able to speak again. The moment he too can nod his head and declare, "My son. Is John—God is gracious." That's the moment he can speak again. Though *I'd* like to think its because he deferred to his wife about naming the baby, perhaps its *rather* that this was about Zechariah aligning himself with God's plan—the plan the angel revealed about nine months before.

And here's the thing. Zechariah doesn't just speak. He sings. We're *told* Zechariah spoke these words. But many scholars will tell you, his language is so lovely that those of us who read it, and those throughout history, have understood it better as a song than as a speech (Kathryn Matthews).

Zechariah sang of God's actions—redeeming, sustaining and upholding the people through history. That's a story the people had heard. That was a song they knew. But as he held his tiny son in his arms in the temple, we something new happened, too.

He gazed at his son and all of a sudden saw a mysterious, living hope for the world. Looking at his child, Zechariah saw God's promises kept through history, yes, *but also the story of God happening in his own world in real time*. This is the part I love. It's on your bulletin cover. Let's read it together. Zechariah says,

***“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...***

*[He continues,]*

*78 By the tender mercy of our God,*

*the dawn from on high will break upon us,*

*79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*

*to guide our feet into the way of peace.’*

“And you, child.” That's the line that hooks me. Not just because it's tender, but because “Zechariah looks at his newborn, who's name means God is gracious, and *feels* God's grace through the sweep of history, [through the baby in his hands] as well as the promise of what is yet to be” (Kathryn Matthews).

When we think Zechariah's song—or for that matter, Mary's magnificat—it seems that these songs praise God for doing a new thing, yes, *but* they are also *prophetic*. Zechariah sang that his child would help usher in nothing less than the dawn for an oppressed people under the boot of the Roman Empire. This is also a song about justice for a weary people.

And if we go back to my friend Emmanuel's description of singing with a Tanzanian understanding, it makes me wonder. Were Zechariah's words were considered a song by ancient faith communities because it's something communities felt called to *sing, to live out together*?

Perhaps we, too, must understand Zechariah's words as a song, so that its something we can all sing. So that it's something we can all enact, be part of, participate in? Perhaps that's the first step toward living out God's promises in our world *today*. Maybe we are to sing songs like Zechariah's. Not to get it right, not to do it perfectly, but in order to give a bit of ourselves to and for the sake of others? Could we all lend our voices in our own unique ways, singing and enacting Zechariah's words be a part of God's great story of mercy and justice, too?

Zechariah sings that John will prepare the way for One who will guide our feet in the way of peace. In a time that feels no more peaceful than things did during Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph's time, in a time that times feel hard because of the state of the world, or seasonal affective disorder, or something else, maybe its more important than ever that we sing together.

Maybe this is our chance to offer a bit of ourselves and lend our voices to God's song. To lend ourselves to mutuality, surrendering our knowledge or our stubbornness for something else to be born in us and in the world. And you know, when we sing together, we offer a bit of ourselves to the community, yes, but we also breathe together. Another way to say “breathe together” is to *conspire*—conspire literally

meaning *con*—with, *spire*—breath. Like *respiration*. When we sing together, we also conspire together, and perhaps God's Spirit joins with us as we do.

Amidst the rampant consumerism, bright glitter of the season and Christmas lights on timers, we are called to be the ones who prepare the way for God, who promises a new dawn.

Let this last part of our Advent journey be a time where we can conspire and sing together as we live lives that work for justice and hope. God is doing something new in the world and in each of us. Let us sing with Zechariah and Elizabeth, with Mary and with all those who have sung before us, that we, too may be ones who keep the rumors of hope alive. Amen.