

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Reign of Christ, November 21, 2010, dedicated in thanksgiving to St. Luke and those who through silence and song carry our faith forward, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“The Silence and Singing of Zechariah”**

**Jeremiah 23:1-6;  
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 1:67-79**

Today the Season of Pentecost ends along with our church year. Counted between Advent I and this day, the Reign of Christ our Lord, we have come full circle through our 52-week cycle. It has been the Gospel of St. Luke that has carried us through the holy days and ordinary days of seven liturgical seasons.

The priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have been with us since Advent II when Zechariah received the revelation of the Angel Gabriel about the birth of a son named John, a great prophet and the forerunner of the Messiah. Receiving this revelation from Gabriel while leading prayers in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, Zechariah questions the angel of the Lord “how this can be so.” Gabriel strikes him mute and proclaims he will not speak again until the day these things occur – more than nine months ahead.

Listen for the word of God which is sung by Zechariah after John’s birth – his first words since questioning Gabriel in the Temple. As we receive these words, may we be filled with the Holy Spirit and glory in the Lord as well!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful Jews and known for their personal holiness. She the daughter of a line of priests, he, the most respected of all the priests in Israel, were well suited for doing God's work on earth and yet, as they were aging, they suffered a silent pain having never been blessed with a child. Blessed in every imaginable way but one, like Sarah and Abraham, they could not conceive but did not lose heart.

A descendant of Aaron, Zechariah was duty-bound to go to the temple once a year and tend to the needs of people coming to worship. For one week, he and others in his section known as the "Abia section," would stoke the fires, mind the building, care for souls. Casting lots to see who would enter the sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) to burn incense at the Holy Altar, Zechariah won the priestly lottery! The smoke he produced would carry the prayers of the people to heaven, perfuming them as they rose from the voices of the people beyond the vale. Then Zechariah would emerge from the sanctuary to bless them, representing God to them as he had just represented them to God.

This was a job no priest could do twice in his lifetime and some never got to do at all. It was his lucky day – so to speak. While inside the sanctuary, the Angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and the priest is terrified. What he did expect? When you enter God's living room, do you not expect to meet God's family? Sometimes members of the priestly order suffer from the curse of the professionally religious and become frightened when God actually interrupts their routines. Maybe, he was simply making a first-hand appeal to the Lord

for a son and dreaming of Elizabeth instead of tending to the incense.

Whatever the case, Zechariah is afraid when the angel tells him, “Your prayer has been heard.”

“Which prayer is he referring to?” Zechariah must have wondered. “I pray all the time!”

Almost as if reading the priest’s frightened mind, Gabriel continues, “You will have a son. His name will be John. Joy and gladness, spirit and power, wisdom and righteousness” will be the fruit of the Holy Spirit born with this child of grace and prophecy.

What happens next is one of the great *faux-passes* of human history. Let’s call it his Homer Simpson moment. Zechariah questions the angel about this blessed gift of a child.

“How will I know this is so?” he asks. It would be worse than waiting your whole life for a gift from your beloved who delivers with joy everything you ever dreamed of and saying, “How much did this cost?” With the power of God Almighty in his wings, Gabriel silences Zechariah for his unbelief – until the day when all is revealed to him.

Reflecting on Zechariah, Barbara Brown Taylor wonders if Zechariah’s response was not so much the sin of disbelief but rather “the failure of imagination, the fear of yet more disappointment and a lifetime habit of hopelessness.” Zechariah had been disappointed so often for so long that he had gotten used to not being heard by God (*Bread of Angels*, p. 93). How was this time to be any different? Have any of you ever been in this place of struggle and questioning God – even when the gift is granted and the prayer is answered? Certainly, you understand Zechariah’s question.

So often we treat Zechariah’s muteness as God’s

punishment for his disbelief and doubt. Something along the lines, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all,” come to mind. But I see Zechariah’s silence as a gift from God. In silence and with an attentive heart of listening to God, Zechariah is very active in this story, especially in conceiving his son with his wife! In his silence, he is given the gift of a son and, more significantly, he is granted the complete and utter awareness of another child – born to the house of David, born to a young woman named Mary, Elizabeth’s cousin and mother of Jesus.

Zechariah pays attention in his silence. He listens. He witnesses every minute, every hour, every day, every week, every month until his son is born. He takes everything in. He is pregnant with the love of God in every moment of Elizabeth’s journey unto birth. This priest who cannot speak pays attention! Imagine that – a priest without words – for at least nine months! How we all long for such a gift from God!

Someone has called Zechariah the patron saint of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church because, like Zechariah, we have been waiting so long for our prayers to be heard! Over and over again we say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” And we wait . . . and we wait. But where is he and how much longer must we wait?

When people ask us, “When is he coming again, this messiah of yours?” We say, “Soon.” They ask for signs, we say, “Be patient. Have faith.” But our words often feel tired and worn out as they leave our lips.

In too many cases, too many people have stopped believing. After all, doesn’t everyone who asks so many probing questions about the messiah that we cannot see and for whom we have waited so long have so many more sexy, interesting, loud and glamorous places to go, people to see and things to chase after?

We live in an age of bombardment of words, images,

information, and human-made truths. Literally, at our fingers is a constant flow of exchange and information. Some of you have (at least) been tempted to use this fingertip control over your life even while we have been worshipping this morning. It is our new addiction. And each day, our addiction for analysis, data and tantalizing illusions of what other people claim is true grows and hits us right between our eyes. We lose heart simply by focusing our lives into boxes that are inches away from our brains.

And as we hear the truth of others, we think: If “so and so” says “this about that” it MUST be true. After all, they are “in the know” and why would they lie to us? We think they have so much more information about “this and that” than I have. Like the Tower of Babel built to the heavens with the bricks of lies and the mortar of half-truths to glorify the rich and powerful of humankind, we build up Babel all over again.

Maybe it is time for us to reclaim the gift of silence demonstrated so long ago by St. Zechariah. Maybe we should shut our mouths, cease our nonstop focus on “I and me” and my I-phone and self-reflecting handheld gizmos. Maybe we should stop trying to explain so much and simply stand before the terrible mystery of God and see what “quiet” has to teach us (Ibid, p. 94).

This past summer – which seems so far away now – I spent seven weeks alone. Some days passed with no words spoken to or received from other people. On such a day as this, I climbed in hill country of Judea and spent most of the day at the birthplace and childhood home of John the Baptist, the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The place is called Ein Kareem. In this still small village, I could hear the wind blowing through the pine trees. And high on a hill above John’s home, I heard locusts buzzing and the small, brave birds of Judea singing on a hot summer day.

I imagined the young John walking with his father here – laughing and playing – listening for the voice of God. I

imagined a younger cousin named Jesus laughing and climbing this hillside with John, enjoying the freedom and delight of his father's creation. And in the wind, I heard God's voice of calm and joy. It was a day filled with God's whispering and Gabriel's fluttering angel wings and void of human chatter.

Since returning I have spent too few moments in silence, especially here at First Church. But the other day I was blessed by God to be in our sanctuary with a mother and her teen-age daughter. They had come downtown from Upper Arlington to take pictures of churches on Broad Street as part of her senior photography project.

It was late afternoon on a sunny day. The light was bursting through the west side windows and beams of light were striking the face of the angel just under the place in which I am now speaking. While the mother and I spoke, the young woman slipped away from our chatter and snapped one shot after the other of the angel's face. Then, there was silence as the two adults watched in admiration the young woman's holy take on life in this sanctuary.

Silence . . . beauty . . . blessing . . . gratitude . . . God.

In a few moments, you will all be asked to pray one last time, fill out and turn in your 2011 pledge cards for our campaign we have called **"More than Enough."** You will be asked to step forward and bring your cards to the baptismal font. We invite members and regular visitors to pledge. We invite the guests for this day to share their morning offering for the ministry and mission of the church, especially for our special offering for Bethlehem on Broad Street.

But before we sing again and walk again, let us be in silence and behold all the gifts God has given us. Let us consider our deep appreciation for these gifts as we consider our sacrificial gifts for the 2011 church year.

And as this church year ends, let us remember the last words of Luke's gospel presented to us through the song of Zechariah:

***“By the tender mercy of 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 in the way of peace.”*** Amen.

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