

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent II, December 6, 2009, dedicated to Rev. John Touchberry, my first preaching teacher and pastor, and always to the glory of God!

“. . . Make Ready”

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

Part II of V in the Advent/Christmas sermon series

“For Such a Time As This . . . ”

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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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“Silence is a virtue,” so we hear. **Prayer** is a gift from God and a petition to the ear and heart of God voiced in urgency, joy and need, so we hear. **Prophecy** is God’s gift to name and wrestle what is just and unjust, what is right and wrong, what is meant to be and what must be overturned, so we hear. **Singing** God’s praises is our faith story given wings and memory as it is carried to the far reaches of space and time to the glory of God, so we hear.

Listen to today’s texts. They are silent, prayerful, prophetic and sung as we make ready for God.

Luke’s Gospel begins and ends in the temple of Jerusalem. For Luke, our life with Jesus Christ must always be centered in temple life – in silence, in prayer, in prophecy, in singing, but always in God’s

Holy of Holies. To care for such a place was a holy task given to the priestly order of Levites, such as Zechariah.

It is with this prayerful and faithful pastor of temple life that we begin our story today. He is a childless priest who is blessed to be married to the barren Elizabeth, whom we know to be a descendant of Aaron, the strong deliverer of Israel and Moses' right-hand man. Like incense, his prayers rise to God. In merciful love, God sends the Angel Gabriel to Zechariah. The priest is paralyzed with fear as the angel announces that Elizabeth shall bear a child and his name shall be called John.

Gabriel goes on, "John will be a prophet of God. He will live a simple and sober life. In the end, he leads many in Israel back to God. And he will prepare even the most hardened skeptics for the coming Messiah." But Zechariah refuses to believe that he and his old wife will bear a child. For his lack of faith, Gabriel silences this man of God, promising to open his lips on John's birthday.

Silence. Along with temple worship, silence will become Luke's calling card this year. We need to embrace the silence of this gospel. That's not so easy because we tend to be uncomfortable with silence. We tend to think of silence as deafening. But how often do we hear silence as a gift from God?

In Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Weisel's book, *A Jew Today*, Wiesel describes how he became a writer. As a young boy riding the transport trains back from the camps and into a world without cremation and gas chambers, he was stunned by the randomness of this return train ride. He writes:

"I knew the role of a survivor was to testify. Only, I did not know how, I lacked the experience, I lacked framework. Should one say it all or hold it all back? Should one shout or whisper? Place the emphasis on those who were gone or on their heirs? How does one describe the indescribable? How does one use restraint in recreating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the gods? And then, how can be

sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear?

“So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly. Long enough to listen to the voices crying inside my own. Long enough to regain possession of my memory. Long enough to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead.” (Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, Random House, New York, N.Y., 1978, p. 18).

Silence. Some things cannot be told. Some things must not be spoken. Some things must testify in silence. But, things must never be forgotten. They must be remembered. Silence dances and waits for the moment to sing.

In Luke 1:68-80, we meet Zechariah once again on the day of John’s birth. God’s need for a prophetic witness breaks the silence of the once unbelieving priest. His tongue is free. His feet are free. He sings and dances telling the waiting world that John is here as a witness to the power of God. John will point us to the one who will save us all!

Listen to Zechariah’s voice as declared through Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

*. . . Our God has come to set God’s people free.
God sets the power of salvation at the center of our lives . . .
. . . deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand,
mercy to our fathers (and mothers)
As God remembers God’s promise to set us free.
(Turning to his newborn son . . .)
And so my child, “Prophet of the Highest”
go ahead of the Master and prepare his ways
Present the offer of salvation to his people,
The forgiveness of their sins.
Through the mercies of God, Shine God’s sunrise into their lives.
Shine on those in darkness, those sitting in darkness,*

Show us the way, one foot at time, down the pathway of peace.
(Lk. 1:68-79)

Is it any wonder that the next passage of scripture tells us that this child grew up healthy and spirited? Is it any wonder that this child, living in the desert until his day of prophetic debut was nothing short of the voice of God?

Out of silence and prayerful reflection comes a witness for the ages. From the father whose tongue is still until his son's birth, comes the song of angels, the voice of God. Zechariah is silent long enough (in the words of Elie Weisel) "to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead."

And what a son he has!

Zechariah's son John comes out of the wordless wilderness to speak to the people of God. Like the great prophet he is, he opens by quoting a great prophet. Using Isaiah's words about leveling mountains and raising desert valleys and preparing a highway for God, John blasts into our story.

Because of John we have no excuses. We cannot say we didn't see this coming. We cannot turn away and bury our heads in the sand. We need to pay attention to the son of God coming among us and proclaiming good news.

Do you know what the name of Jesus means? Are you aware that "Jesus" means "Liberator?" The one who is coming will liberate us. While we are captive to sin, the Liberator is free enough to forgive us and make sure we don't end up trapped in sin. While we too often turn away from all that is beautiful and good, the Liberator refocuses our eyes and hearts on those in need. While we too often miss the message of salvation, the Liberator intends to not only save us as individuals, but bring justice, peace, and righteousness to the earth.

In a time such as this, what will you do to make ready? In a

time such as this, how will you be silent when your tongue is poised for poison? How will you allow silence to guide your feet into the path of peace?

In a time such as this, how will your prayer be lifted to God as one who is working for liberation not oppression?

In a time such as this, how will you wrestle with God's justice over the world's injustice, God's right over the world's wrong, God's goodness over the world's hate? How will you cry out, "No more war," in a time such as this?

In a time such as this, how will you sing God's praise to a world cast in darkness while the Liberator is being born again? Remembering Elie Wiesel's words, let us cry out so that we might unite the language of humanity with the silence of the dead. Amen.