

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 9, 2012, Advent II, dedicated to Lliam Everett Collins and Andrew James Stewart McWilliams on their baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Bethlehem: Salvation from a Stable”

***Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79
(Part II of V in the Sermon Series
“Christ is Coming”)***

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

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The Gospel of St. Luke begins and ends in the temple of Jerusalem. For Luke, our life with Jesus Christ must always be centered in worship, which we experience in temple life. For Luke, our encounter with God is found in the silence, in the prayer, in the prophecy, in the singing, in the serving - but always in God’s Holy of Holies. To care for such a place was the holy task given to the priestly order of Levites, such as Zechariah. It is with this prayerful and faithful priest of temple life that we begin our story today.

Zechariah 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. Day in and day out, Zechariah’s prayers rise like incense to God. God hears the prayers of this faithful man. In merciful love, God sends the Angel Gabriel to Zechariah. But the appearance of the angel of

the Lord is too much for the aging priest. He 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 will lead many in Israel back to God. And he will prepare even the most hardened skeptics for the coming Messiah.”* Zechariah’s fear changes to disbelief as he refuses to believe that he and his old wife will bear a child. Because of his disbelief, God’s man is **silenced** by God’s angel, who promises to open Zechariah’s lips on John’s birthday.

Silence. Nine months of silence. Imagine your pastor with a silenced tongue for nine months (or maybe not). With no words coming out of his mouth, Zechariah was blessed to LISTEN to the women in his life – Elizabeth and her cousin Mary – both pregnant and both living under his roof. From these mighty women of faith, Zechariah must have learned a few things. It would be a blessing to every man to listen that long and well to the women in his life. In addition, in his absolute silence, Zechariah could listen to John and Jesus growing within the wombs of their mothers. He could hear them coming to life and beginning to express themselves. Even more, Zechariah was silent enough to hear God’s pulse, to feel God’s presence.

Along with temple worship, silence is one of Luke’s calling cards. We need to embrace the silence of this Gospel. That’s not so easy because many of us tend to be uncomfortable with silence – at least the extraverts among us. Many of us tend to think of silence as deafening. But how often do we hear and receive 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 out of the Holocaust, back from the death camps and into a world without cremation and gas chambers, Weisel 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. We feel some things cannot be told. We feel some things must not be spoken. Some things must testify in silence. But these things must never be forgotten. They must be remembered.

Silence weeps and smiles; trudges and dances - inside. Silence waits for the moment to whisper and then to cry out, then to sing. Silence waits for the moment when, with pen in hand, words come. Silence waits.

In Luke 1:68-79, the silent Zechariah speaks once again on the day of John's birth. God's breaks Zechariah's silence because God needs a prophetic witness from this 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 named John grew up healthy and high-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 "to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead (in the words of Elie Weisel)."

And what a son John is! 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's words, 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.

The words of Zechariah's singing bounce off the pillars of Jerusalem's temple and find their way to the straw on the floor of a Bethlehem stable – just 10 miles away (the distance from here to Worthington or Reynoldsburg or Grove City). It is three months later when in the silence of the night is broken again and the cries

of the newborn Jesus are heard echoing through the town of Bethlehem.

God comes in the birth of God's son – tiny, humble, naked, and helpless and within days of his arrival – a homeless refugee – who is wanted and hunted and fleeing to Egypt. If you look closely at his coming, if you sit in silence and consider who he really is – Jesus doesn't help sell the season of gluttony and commercialism that has exploded around him. He is born of a 14-year-old single mom and adoptive dad who bear more social stigma than social class. He is born in a town where – supposedly – all of his extended family - the heirs of David - have come for a tax assessment, but we have no record that any of his family coming to the stable with any gifts or food or simply to stop by to visit. Instead, a shipwrecked crew of poor shepherds show up to kneel before him. That's it. That is all. Later star gazers will show up with real gifts. But our story is silent about the 12 days in between.

Looking on Aubrey and Andrew and Liam, and thinking of Joanna and Jamie and Laura and Lance – I wonder if they or anyone here would really like their baby to be born in filth of a barn, welcomed by the drool of donkeys and cows and the odor of their manure? Which one of you (conscious of germs of diseases) would want your child laid in a feed trough with hay for the mattress and salt peter for a pillow and cold night air as the first atmosphere in which in your blood soaked newborn is welcomed?

Jesus born of Mary comes to save us from ourselves. His humble and hard beginnings are used by God to shape the heart of a man who cares deeply for all human beings.

While Zechariah is breaking his silence and hollering about John, John is merely getting ready to holler about the Savior himself. Do you know what the name of Jesus means? Are you aware that "Jesus" means "Liberator?" A liberator is one who comes to overturn injustice and create a new way for peace with justice.

The one born in a barn is born to 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 – and tells us they are beautiful and we should care for them. While we too often miss the message of salvation, the Liberator intends to not only save us as individuals, but to bring justice, peace, and righteousness to our community of faith and to the whole earth.

The Liberator is coming again! Jesus is coming again. This is our belief. This is our faith. So what are you doing to prepare a place for him? How will you be silent when your tongue is poised for poison? And how will your silence guide your feet into the path of peace? In this season, how will your silent 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? How will you put into perspective what is right and what is wrong and step up on the right side?

Remembering Elie Wiesel's words, "Let us cry out so that we might unite the language of humanity with the silence of the dead," and let us live into a new birth known in Jesus of Bethlehem. Amen.

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