

“Singing after The Silent Treatment”

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An Advent Reflection

Luke 1:68-79

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Zechariah came from a long lineage of priests. Same with Elizabeth his wife. Together they represented the best of God’s People: righteous before God, faithful to God’s ways. But they were childless, and too elderly for parenthood.

One day, Zechariah was at work, serving in God’s Temple. He was picked to go inside and make the offering to God. So he was there, alone. Mid-prayer, an angel interrupted him. The old man froze as Gabriel announced: Elizabeth will become pregnant, you will name your child “John,” John will be Spirit-filled, John will bring many back to God and God’s ways, John will get them ready for God’s arrival.

“Unbelievable!” Zechariah blurted out his skepticism. But God will not be held to our unbelief. So Gabriel gave Zechariah “the Silent Treatment,” sentencing him to a speechlessness to last through Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

You know what happened. Old Elizabeth became pregnant. She birthed a son. Folks were set to name him “Zechariah” like his dad, at which point Zechariah’s tongue was loosed so he could burst out: *“His name is John.”*

Now, Zechariah’s mouth will not stop. Let’s read, together, what Zechariah has to say.

Read this like someone who has been silenced and now speaks, who has been childless and now is a dad, and now beholds with wonder what God is doing.

Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
for He has visited and redeemed His people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of His servant David.
as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets
who have been since the world began,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us:
to perform the mercy promised to our ancestors;
and to remember His holy covenant,
the oath which He swore to our father Abraham;
to grant us that we,
being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve Him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. (continued)

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
for you will go before the face of the Lord
to prepare His ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to His people
by the remission of their sins,
through the tender mercy of our God,
with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us
to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:68-79
New King James Version (alt)

II

That's a "canticle." Canticle means "small song."¹ It is a Bible-song. There are many Bible-songs in the Book of Psalms. Canticles are the ones outside of the Psalms. The First Testament, which we share with Jews, has many canticles. So does the Christian New Testament, especially around the events of Jesus' birth.

This season, preparing to celebrate Jesus' Advent among us, we are going to dig into these canticles. We will see how they help us celebrate the good news of what God has done in Jesus.

These canticles have become known by their Latin first word or words. Latin, because that was the language used most often in Christian Europe for many centuries. So we will celebrate with the *Ave Maria*, the *Magnificat*, the *Nunc Dimittis*, and the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. What do those words mean? You'll have to come and find out.

Today it's Zechariah's *Benedictus*. *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel." *Benedictus* means "Blessed." In different liturgical traditions, the *Benedictus* is said as a new day dawns. Also, at funerals, when the casket is lowered, celebrating the new beginning God gives.²

III

The *Benedictus* sings of God breaking into a life, a people, a world whose stories were going nowhere.

Zechariah's story was going nowhere. His life was closer to its end than its beginning. He would have no son to bury him, to mourn him, to remember him. He came from a

¹ "Canticle" comes from the Latin *canticulum*, which is a diminutive of *canticum* (song). See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle>

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benedictus_\(Song_of_Zechariah\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benedictus_(Song_of_Zechariah))

long line of priests, fathers handing over this most sacred work to their sons. With Zechariah, it would end. His personal and family story would end.

Israel's story was going nowhere. For many generations, there had been an aching sense among God's People that God was absent. For a while, they had actually been exiled, a sure sign of God's judgement. But even after they returned to the land of God's promise, and rebuilt (including this wonderful new Temple where Zechariah worked), God still seemed gone. God had crafted Israel to be God's People for the world. But where was God?

Zechariah's own story mirrored Israel's larger story. And Israel's story mirrored the whole world's story, and our stories in in. Sometimes, it seems things are moving forward. Even, that we are moving ahead quickly! Or, are we running in circles? We make great strides. We stumble and crash down. Do we learn? Even when we do, is learning enough? Even when I know what to do "up here" [tap head] . . . in here [tap chest], the heart of me . . . that's another story.

What's wrong with us? The whole world, and us in it, stuck, going nowhere. Israel, that God created to represent us before God and God before us, stuck, going nowhere. Zechariah, holy, righteous and good, stuck, going nowhere.

What sort of story is this? It is the real story, the only story there is.

IV

God is breaking into it.

God has been walking with us, all along. Since the Beginning and since each of our beginnings. God has never left us.

What is different now—what God has done, what Zechariah was told, and what Zechariah's son John will be getting people ready for—is this: In Jesus, God has come to us, profoundly and personally.

Zechariah's song evokes a pattern.

God creates, and it is beautiful and good. But we trash it. So God seems absent.
Silent.

God creates a nation, through Abraham and Sarah. Their Israel will shine God's light back into the world of darkness. But Israel ends up enslaved. God seems absent.
Silent.

God leads Israel to freedom, using Moses. God renews the promise. They will live by God's Way. But they want to go their own ways. God seems absent. Silent.

God gives them King David. But even with him, it all continues to fall apart. There is chaos, for generations. Then, Exile. God seems absent. Silent.

Eventually they return! Still, God seems absent. Silent.

Into this pattern, God breaks yet again. This is Zechariah's message. God is coming! In person! Forever!

Did his nine-month forced silent-treatment make Zechariah listen? Listening, he became a prophet. Prophets are not pious fortune-tellers. Prophets are people to whom God has given understanding of what God is doing. These canticles we will look at are sung by prophets: Zechariah, Elizabeth (next week), Mary, Simeon. God gave them realization of what God was doing, so they could tell it.

V

Advent is a time for you to listen.

We think God is silent, God is not speaking, God is absent. Maybe it's because we are too caught up in our own noise. And noise around us.

We need to filter this out, and be silently attentive to God.

Can you carve out time, each day, for silence? For sitting and waiting on what God is doing?

You might sit with your Bible. Maybe take the Gospel of Luke, read and sit with a bit of it each day through Advent. What is God saying to you? Sit with whatever has been happening each day. What is God saying to you?

But be sure to leave silence, for God.

Don't expect some profound realization to flood immediately into your soul. It might. But Zechariah had nine months!

Then, the old man birthed a wonderful delight. God has not left us. God is with us. God has come to us. The Saviour is near.

Glory be to God!