

“Covenant: Zechariah and Elizabeth”

Luke 1: 5-25

I always enjoy the Advent texts. They give us an opportunity to take a look at some of the lesser known stories in the Bible, like our text today. I invite us to listen to the story of two people, old in their age who had their very own angelic experience, two people who are only mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, two people whose story seems to be the lesser of the important parts of the Christmas narrative, two people who learned that angels have a funny way of showing up and reminding us of God’s promises.

Read the Text: Message Version

Can you imagine being silent for nine months? Not being able to talk for nine months, not being able to use your voice for nine months? Can you imagine? Talking is such a big part of how we communicate, how I communicate that I just can’t seem to wrap my mind around not being able to use my voice for nine months.

Maybe it is because I was always the kid when we played the Quiet game; you know the game to see who can be the quietest the longest, a parental favorite. I was always the kid to speak up almost as soon as someone said the game was

going to start. Maybe that is why it is hard for me to imagine being silent, not talking, not being able to use my voice for nine months but here we have the story of Zechariah and that is exactly what he did. Now granted it was not his choice. He was struck silent by the angel but can you imagine, for nine months, his frustrations, his attempts to communicate, his want to get a point across but not really knowing if he was being understood, all because he could not talk, all because he had lost his voice. He was rendered silent by the angel Gabriel. Can you imagine?

Can you imagine being silent for nine months, all because you would not believe in the message that was being shared with you by an angel?

This story is hard for us to believe and may even be harder for us to imagine really happening today but as I lived with this text this week, I kept running across more and more examples of exactly how this story is true, more and more examples of how we as the church are being rendered silent today-all because we won't believe in the message of God's love and grace that is being sent especially for us.

In our life time we have watched church attendance decline. Nowadays, it is more likely that we will hear someone say that they are spiritual but not religious and don't go to church. Nowadays, it is more likely that we will find a church building being used for some other purpose that it was originally built for, some

purpose other than being a place where people can come in and know that they are embraced and loved as a child of God. Nowadays we don't hear about churches sharing the Gospel message. We about churches fighting and arguing and tearing each other down. Nowadays we don't hear the Gospel message of peace and hope as much as we should, as much as it is needed because the church is being rendered silent. All because we will not believe and embrace the message of God's love and grace that is being sent especially for us.

I couldn't help be see the similarities in Zechariah's situation and ours as the modern day church. What strikes me about this text is Zechariah's response to Gabriel's message. Sure, he trembles in fear. The Bible tells us that this is a normal reaction to one of God's heavenly messengers. There is nothing unusual about that reaction of Zechariah's. What strikes me as I read this text is Zechariah's verbal response to this message of joy and hope. He will not believe.

You see- Zechariah is in the Temple for his once in a lifetime service and he encounters an angel, an angel who tells him some really amazing news. Gabriel tells Zechariah that his prayers have been answered, that even though they are old in age, he and his wife will have a son. And that son is going to do wonderful things. He is going to bring people to God. He is going to prepare the way for the Messiah. He is going to be filled with the Holy Spirit as soon as he leaves the womb. Such amazing news!

Actually it is great news! Great news for the priestly couple-the son is going to follow in the family tradition of serving the Lord. Great news for an old couple, especially in those days because their very existence relied on having someone to take care of them, relied on having a son. Great news for Zechariah and the people of God. God had heard their prayer and was actively working to fulfill their requests.

Great news!! And all Zechariah could say in response to such great news is, “Do you really expect me to believe this?”

What?! What kind of reaction is that? What kind of response is that?

Here-Zechariah has just been told the best news of his life. He has just been told the best news that he could ever receive. His prayers have been answered. He is going to have a son. And this son is going to prepare the way for the Messiah who is coming to restore God’s people once more! And all he could say is, “Do you really expect me to believe this?”

So Gabriel responds by saying, “Okay, fine. Zechariah since you won’t believe, you are going to be silent for the next nine months. Because I’m going to tell you, all of this is going to come to true in time, God’s time. Just wait and see!”

You see- It wasn’t that Zechariah didn’t believe. It was that he would not believe. Here we have this guy, a priest, serving in the Temple. His family has been priests for years. They can trace their family line all the way back to Aaron,

the original Temple guy. And because of his family heritage and because he serves in the Temple, Zechariah knows the stories deep in his heart. He knows the stories of how God, time after time, has made the impossible possible. He is as inside as an insider can get in the church. He knows the stories of how God has worked time after time to restore the people of God and yet he still, when faced with his own healing experience, won't believe.

Zechariah's very own livelihood is telling the people to trust and believe in the promises of God and yet when it comes to his actual experience, when it comes down to his actual belief, when it comes to him trusting in the promises and stepping out in faith, when it comes down to the fact that he is told that he is standing in the presence of God, hearing some really amazing news, Zechariah just will not believe.

It is not that he doesn't believe. It is that he won't believe. There is a difference.

And that difference becomes very clear in Zechariah's response: Do you really expect me to believe this? Do you really expect me to believe that God will do the impossible? Do you really expect me to believe that God has answered my prayer? Why is it that a guy who knows the stories of how God has time after time done the impossible will not just believe in the amazing promises of God.

And because he will not believe, Zechariah is rendered silent.

Just like what is happening to our churches nowadays. We as the church have been rendered silent in our wider culture today. We as the church are seen as pointless and irrelevant. The church no longer has a voice in our wider culture. In fact, news reports said that in this last election, people did not really care about the candidates' faith like they have in previous elections. Faith and church never really entered the discussion. Faith and church were never really brought up in the conversation. All because in our wider culture today, the church has been rendered silent. And as I lived with this text this past week, I couldn't help but think why that is because we as people of faith will not believe in God's promises, promises that are being sent especially for us. It is not that we don't believe. We would not be here if that were true. It is because we won't believe. God's promises have simply become words on a page that we read sometimes now and again.

Even though we may find the story of Zechariah hard to believe, it is not impossible for us to see that we as the church are being rendered silent, and are seen as pointless and irrelevant because we won't believe, because we won't proclaim, because we won't embrace the good news about God's love and grace that is being sent especially for us. And if that is not hard for us to realize, what does it say about the future of the church here on earth?

I find it hard to imagine that anyone would want to really hear us share the Gospel message and to really open their hearts to the amazing transforming grace

of God if we as the church will not believe in it? Wouldn't you? Maybe that's the real reason there are so many empty pews in our churches nowadays. Maybe that's the real reason people are leaving the church.

Because every day as people of faith, we are experiencing the promises of God and we will not believe. Every day as people of faith, we are hearing the promise that God has answered our prayers and we will not believe. Every day we are hearing angels, telling us that we are standing in the presence of God and we will not believe that it is actually happening to us and for us. It is not that we as the church don't have a purpose or mission. It is because we are not living out and embracing our mission to share the news, the news of God's life transforming love and grace with a world that desperately needs to hear it that people see the church as irrelevant and pointless.

How can we expect others, some who have never heard the Gospel before, some who really just need to know that God is answering their prayers, some who just simply need to know that someone cares, How can we expect others to believe in the amazing, life-giving love and grace of God if we as the messengers of the Gospel here on earth, the ones who know the stories, the ones who have experienced God's love and grace in our own lives, the ones who are the church, if we will not believe in the amazing life transforming news ourselves, news that is being sent especially for us.

It is not that we don't believe. We would not be here if that were true. It is that we will not believe that our God really is doing amazing things in our world and in our lives. The promises of God have simply become words on a page for us.

And because we won't believe, because we won't proclaim, because we won't embrace, because we won't live out our true purpose of sharing this amazing life transforming news that God loves us, that God has heard our prayers, and that God is still working in the world, we have been rendered silent. We are seen as pointless. We are seen as irrelevant in our culture today. As the church, we have lost our voice and are now struggling to communicate, not even knowing if we are being understood, not knowing if our message is being comprehended. Frustrations are rising in the church and blame is going around and unfortunately, the saddest part of it all is that the amazing news of God's love and grace is being lost in translation and interpretation.

We have been told that God has heard our prayers and we as the church respond by saying, "Do you really expect me to believe this?"

We as the church have been rendered silent. We are seen as pointless. We are being pushed aside and called irrelevant. We as the church have lost our voice.

So what is the good news for us, as people of faith, as the church? Surely, silence is not how this story is going to end for us and Zechariah.

The good news is, of course not. Zechariah's silence was not permanent. He regained his voice upon the birth of his son. He regained his voice when he opened his heart to God's Spirit. He regained his voice when he truly began believing, believing deeply, passionately in the promises of God. He regained his voice when he truly trusted in God. And his first words after nine months of not talking were words of praise. His first words after nine months of losing his voice were words calling the people to remember, to know, and to believe in the promises of God.

Listen to his words:

Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he came and set his people free.
He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives,
and in the very house of David his servant,
Just as he promised long ago
through the preaching of his holy prophets:
Deliverance from our enemies
and every hateful hand;
Mercy to our fathers,
as he remembers to do what he said he'd do,
What he swore to our father Abraham—
a clean rescue from the enemy camp,
So we can worship him without a care in the world,
made holy before him as long as we live.
And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest,"
will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,
Present the offer of salvation to his people,
the forgiveness of their sins.
Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of death,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
down the path of peace.

God remembered. God kept God's word all along. God did not forget. Even Luke gives signs to us that silence is not how this story is going to end. he chooses very specific names in the telling of this story. Zechariah's name means: God has remembered and Elizabeth's name means: my God's oath.

God has remembered my God's oath. From the very beginning of this story, silence was never supposed to be the last word. From the very beginning of time, silence was never supposed to be the last word for us as the people of God. God has always kept God's promise to the people of God. God has never forgotten God's promises to the people of God.

But time and time again the people have! The people have not believed. The people have not trusted. Time and time again, the people have forgotten the promises of God and we are still forgetting them today. All because we still will not believe, we still will not trust, in the amazing life transforming grace and love of God. And we as the church have been rendered silent.

The good news is that silence, our silence, is not how this story ends. God has remembered God's promises to us. God has heard our prayers. Every word of God's promises will come true in time, God's time. That's the key. There is God's time and there is our time. And for the most part, they are not the same thing. Every word of God's promises will come true in time, God's time.

All we have to do until then is believe. All we have to do until then is trust. All we have to do until then is have faith. All we have to do until then is know that God has always kept God's promise to the people of God.

Every word of God's promises will come true in time, God's time and we will once again regain our voice. We will regain our voice when we truly begin to believe. We will regain our voice when we truly embrace our call to be the voice for the voiceless. We will regain our voice when we truly open our hearts and embrace the amazing news of God's love and grace, news that is being sent especially for us. We will regain our voice when we remember that God has always remembered God's oath to God's people.

And until then, may we strive to truly communicate the life giving and life transforming news, news that God has heard our prayers, news that God has remembered, news that God has claimed us and named us as God's own. May we strive to truly communicate that silence is not how this story ends. Every word of God's promises will come true in time, God's time. Amen.