



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Draw Near to Wonder”

Luke 1:5-20

December 9, 2018

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I'm going just going to come out and say it. I don't think the angel comes across well in this story. I really don't like how Gabriel treats Zechariah. But first, let me share a little more information about Zechariah. He's not the best-known character in the Bible. We are more familiar with his wife Elizabeth. She is related to Mary – a cousin, is our best guess. Zechariah and Elizabeth are the parents of John the Baptist.

But the story, our story, begins, with no child and no hope for a child because Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. Yes, Zechariah is old but he is also a priest, given an important assignment. He alone will enter the sanctuary in the temple in Jerusalem to burn incense on the altar, while the people pray outside. The smoke he produces will carry these prayers to God.

Once inside the temple, the angel Gabriel appears and speaks to Zechariah. The angel has news to deliver: Zechariah and Elizabeth are to have a son, a special child who will bring joy and gladness into their lives and into the world.

Now, there are many things that Zechariah could have said and perhaps should have said in response to the angel's good news. But Zechariah says,

How will I know that this is so?

I think that's a perfectly reasonable response. He is not questioning the good news. He just wants details. He knows that he will soon need to communicate all of this to a skeptical Elizabeth. So, Zechariah presses the angel for more information, for a sign, a receipt, a voucher, for something he can hold on to.

How will I know that this is so?

It clearly isn't the response Gabriel is looking for. Gabriel punishes Zechariah by taking away his voice. For the nine months that his wife is pregnant, Zechariah cannot speak.

Is that how angels are supposed to behave? Is that an abuse of angel power? Aren't they supposed to be more subtle, less petty? Taking away someone's voice seems unworthy of an angel of the Lord.

Zechariah's muteness is intended as punishment for doubt. But I wonder if forced silence isn't a gift – unexpected and unwanted, but a gift nevertheless. Call it a sabbatical from speaking. A time to watch and listen rather than pronounce and explain. The gift that Zechariah needs to prepare for what is coming. Parenting, especially in old age, is challenging and demanding and, given what we know of John the Baptist, he probably isn't going to be an easy kid. Silence is good preparation for the noise and chaos that await Zechariah.

Zechariah can't be trusted to speak because he can't possibly do justice to his experience with Gabriel. Can any of us explain transcendence? Can any of us put words to holiness that comes out of the blue? How can one be

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articulate in the face of mystery and wonder? What is there to say at the birth of a child? How can one capture in words the sight of a sunset at the Grand Canyon? There are moments when words fail us and this one certainly qualifies.

What is the one thing you have the opportunity to do a whole lot more of when you can't speak? Listen. It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to another person. To really listen to them. Undivided, complete attention. I wonder whom Zechariah listens to during those nine months. His wife Elizabeth perhaps? Does he discover things about her that remained hidden from him when he did most of the talking? Silence, particularly at this time of year, can be such a gift to ourselves, to others, such an offering to the world.

I've preached on this passage before and I always end the sermon with an invitation to silence and stillness, an invitation to quiet the chatter inside and around us, to put aside our devices, to step away from distractions so as to fully embrace each opportunity for depth and connection and meaning. This time, I'm going to add a caveat. A disclaimer. Some counter-testimony.

Because I am aware that silence and stillness may not be an option for you. Or, silence and stillness may not be what you most need. Jamie Wright is an author and blogger. She has written about being a part of a mom's group at her church. At the time, she was mother to three young children. The mom's group was reading a book that suggested that what all Christians need, men and women of all ages, but especially parents, is daily quiet time with God. She writes,

In the book we were studying together, we'd read about how quiet time was crucial to our spiritual lives... Originating from the ancient discipline of intentionally making space each day to commune with God, today quiet time is a spiritual practice most often observed on social media: #quiettime pics usually include a lit candle sitting next to a cup of coffee with visible steam, or maybe a latte with foam art, and an open Bible, preferably out of focus.

Mothers of young children are famous for trying to fit quiet time in during nap time, which also happens to be laundry time, dishes time, shower time, and stare-off-into-space-in-stunned-silence time. From a teething baby to a buzzing dryer to falling asleep at the table with her eyes open, more often than not, quiet time is a total bust for Mama Bear. So it was no surprise when everyone in the group sadly agreed that a daily quiet time seemed like an impossible luxury.

The book, of course, offered a solution for our quiet-time dilemmas. It said, "Get up earlier." Yup. All you have to do is get up and have your quiet time in the dark before anyone else in the entire world is awake, because "you can sleep when you're dead." It said that. For real. Like, it actually said, "You can sleep when you are dead." I'm not kidding. A bunch of baby-brained, undernourished, zombie moms were being told that what they really needed to make their lives better was *less sleep*.

Wright continues,

For the record, I'm not anti-quiet time. I actually think it's a healthy part of any spiritual life, and I try to make a habit of it now that my kids are... grown up and out of the way. But this happened when my babies were still babies. And I don't know if you know this, but living with small children is a lot like swimming with piranhas—they may not swoop in and kill you outright, but the nipping and nibbling are relentless.

So Wright didn't take very well to the suggestion that what God needed from her was less sleep. She writes that she said something like this to leader of her mom's group.

I don't think that's how it works. I really don't. I think God is *with us*. Like, day in and day out, in the chaos and the noise and the silliness of life, *[God] is there*. The God of your precious, untouchable 'quiet time' is a present witness to our nonstop lives, never absent from the clamor of our kids' laughter, their squeals, their skinned knees, their fussing and whining and raging fits in the Target parking lot... I will *not* be getting up earlier. Nope. I'm gonna honor God intentionally *in my sleep*, because I'm pretty sure God wants me to be the very best mother I can possibly be... I will listen for God's voice in the wilderness, and at the water park, and under McDonald's indoor play structure, because that is my daily *loud time* and God is faithful to meet me in the chaos.¹

Oh my but I love that rant. It's a reminder that our real lives – our actual real lives don't always include scented candles and artistically poured cups of coffee. Maybe your life contains lots of noise and chaos and few if any opportunities for silence and stillness.

Or, maybe it's the opposite. Maybe your life is too quiet, too still and you ache for connections and people and voices to fill the emptiness. There are all sorts of reasons that happens. An unexpected illness or injury. You move to a new city. Take a new job. Your best friend moves away. You are battling depression or anxiety. Your kids go off to college. You have outlived your spouse and many of your peers. There are all sorts of reasons why life may be too quiet. And the last thing you need to do is add more silence and stillness.

So, no, this morning, I'm not going to tell you that you need to follow Zechariah's example and embrace more silence this Advent. What I am going to suggest is that you honor God as you are able. What am I going to suggest is that you be open to receive the gifts that come your way. The gifts that you – living your actual life – need. I'm not talking about the kind of gifts that can be purchased and wrapped. I'm talking about gifts that go a little deeper. Opportunities to heal that which is broken inside of us. Opportunities to serve others. Any and all things that remind us of our connection to God and our connection to one another. So, next Sunday come and watch the God's Treasure's class light the Advent candles or volunteer to help deliver Angel Tree packages. Come and sing carols at Westminster Thurber on December 23. May we lean into anything and everything that reminds us that this season is all about God. All about God's love that reaches into our actual, real lives – into the actual real life of the world.

Receive the gifts of this season. One such gift is the music we are about to hear. It is buoyant and glorious, contemplative and deep. The words and music we will hear are full of power and glory. Mystery and joy.

We can hear all that. Right now. Right here.

Receive the gift. Amen.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/day-i-revealed-other-moms-im-bad-christian>