

Malachi 3: 1-6
Luke 1: 4-25
Luke 1: 57-79

“He Began to Speak, Praising God”
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Mary R. Brownlow

An old proverb tells us that Silence is golden. Richard Foster, a writer of books on spirituality, says, “Progress in intimacy with God means progress toward silence.” And the comedian and theologian Will Rogers once said, “Never miss a good chance to shut up.” We live in a world that loves to communicate through words and sound... whether or not there is anything important to say. Our tradition of worship is very wordy as well, Scripture is read, sermons are considered important, texts of hymn matter to us. Our moments of silence in worship are few. And I am the guilty party here: by word count, I think I far outstrip anyone else in verbosity. But I just follow in the tradition of storytellers and prophets and angels and other messengers who feel compelled to articulate the Good News of God. But, remember, silence can be golden.

This week I silently contemplated the backstory for the birth of John the Baptist. Those verses are not read very often in worship. We hear about the visit that the pregnant Mary pays to the pregnant Elizabeth (we’ll read that in a couple of weeks) and we hear the “*Benedictus*,” the praise song Zechariah gives when his son is named. But today I wanted to think about the beginning of the chapter. Because it is Advent, the waiting time, and I don’t want to rush through the story.

Zechariah was from a family of priests, and it was his job to take a turn in the priestly rotation, a week or two at a time, as the one offering incense in the Temple. Being well on in years, he had done this many times before. This time, however, he gets a shock: when the smoke gets in his eyes, he also has a vision of a messenger from God. It’s a birth announcement, along with naming directives and parenting instructions. No wine or spirits for the expected child John, because he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

I said that Zechariah was shocked, but he is not speechless. He says, in effect, “I think you have the wrong priest...do you know how old Elizabeth and I are?” Now, I could have told him that, according to all the old stories, angels don’t like to be contradicted. Gabriel says, “I got this Good News directly from God. Don’t sass me. In fact, don’t say anything, to anyone.” He hits the mute button on Zechariah.

Zechariah has to wait, and not say a thing when his wife lets him know that she is pregnant. He has to stand by and make no comment when her pregnant teenage cousin shows up for a visit. He has to observe his wife’s growing belly, and stay silent. Surrounded by women who are breaking all the old rules and expectations, he watches, and listens, and wonders. Nine months of it. Nine months of learning what God is like, what tomorrow is like, and what new story is being written. It is a kind of gestation period for the new Zechariah: the one who is a father. The one who sings the Lord a new song, the song that tunes an ancient tradition into a startling melody.

Zechariah serves as the connection between the traditions of ancient Israel and the dawn of a new era. He is firmly enmeshed in the priestly life, with its duties and expectations. He “lived blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord,” as it says. But the nine months of silence have allowed him to observe new patterns and possibilities. He sees that the

words of the prophets may finally come true. He sees that God is acting according to the holy covenant. He sees the possibilities for this 8-day-old child. This infant will be the one who will prepare for God to appear in surprising new ways, to give light in the darkness.

We do not know what Zechariah was like as a father. But I see him as the bearer of a precious legacy, the gift of the memory of generations. I also see him as the guardian of an unusual child, one who will upset the status quo. He is a model for us of how to be a link from past to future; to think about what our legacies will be. How will God's covenant be fulfilled in the future? His example all starts with silent watching and waiting. With listening before speaking.

This makes me think of centering prayer, a contemplative practice that many find to be a pathway to both a deeper spirituality and a more committed life of action. Those who engage in this prayer form feel that God often speaks most clearly to us in moments when we can quiet our own minds and voices. Words can sometimes be more reflective of our own anxieties and concerns than of God's action. While prayerful words can be a beautiful mode of communication, they can also be distractions from fully placing oneself in God's hands. Sometimes our words, like Zechariah's, display our own limits. Silence makes room for the fullness of God's dynamic and healing power.

This Advent, what if we consider that God invites us to enter more deeply into times of silence. In the quiet, God is still at work. God's power exceeds our own ability to name, to capture, or to control the events in our lives. In entering into silence, we enter more deeply into God's mystery. We are not idle. Like Zechariah, we learn to trust in God's transforming power taking place in the as-yet-unknown, the as-yet-unborn. We learn to receive and to trust in a new story.

This second Sunday in Advent, when we have lit the candle of peace, we are so aware of the threats to peace, both at home and abroad. Shootings at a Planned Parenthood Clinic, at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernadino, the shooting deaths of young African Americans, bombings in Iraq and Syria. And all of these tragic events seem to call forth an instant torrent of words from politicians and social media and news media. The cacophony of instant response does not help us, or bring us peace, or give us hope. The part of the human brain that needs trigger-fast response is given free rein, while the "slow" part of the brain, the part that finds solutions and innovations, is ignored. Maybe we need to enter into the peace of God, the peace that surpasses understanding or verbal explanation, before we can work towards peace on earth.

Maybe when we become temporarily mute and sit in this quiet time of Advent we might begin to see where new life is possible. We could sit quietly long enough to slow down and notice what God is doing all around us. Long enough to know what we hope for. Long enough to be ready to burst into praise.

I close with a prayer from the Iona Community, the Prayer for Three Voices, written by Yvonne Morland:

Voice 1: God of justice, keep us silent
when the only words we have to utter
are ones of judgment, exclusion or prejudice.
Teach us to face the wounds in our own hearts (Silence)
GOD OF JUSTICE, GIVE US POWER OF SPEECH
TO RESIST INJUSTICE, OPPRESSION AND HATE,

NOT ONLY ON OUR OWN BEHALF
BUT FOR OTHERS WHO ARE NOT HEARD.

MAKE US PEACEMAKERS AND RESTORERS OF THE STREETS.

Voice 2: God of power, keep us silent
so that we may listen respectfully to another person's pain
without trying to fade or fix it,
for you are present within each one of us (Silence)

GOD OF POWER, GIVE US COURAGE

TO SHARE OUR GIFTS OF SPEECH TO COMFORT, UPHOLD AND STRENGTHEN.

LET US BE A GLIMPSE OF YOUR LOVE TO THOSE IN NEED.

Voice 3: God of love, in the silence of our hearts
give us words of welcome, acceptance and renewal
so that when we speak our words come from you (Silence)

GOD OF LOVE, GIVE US VOICES OF PRAISE

TO CELEBRATE EACH OTHER AND THE GLORIES OF CREATION

BELIEVING THAT WE ALL LIVE WITHIN YOUR BLESSING.