

From Silence to Song

Luke 1:67-79

FOCUS: God breaks into the ordinary to bring the extraordinary gospel of forgiveness through Christ.

FUNCTION:

Prayer for Illumination

Luke 1:67-79

Sermon

The Christmas season is always a time marked by song.

We all have our favorite Christmas carols, don't we?

We might get sick of them come New Year but we're always ready to greet them again after Thanksgiving.

Radio's change their line up to fall in line with the themes of the holiday.

Stores pipe it through the intercom, hoping to put you into the Christmas (i.e., spending) mood.

Our passage this morning is also a song:

one of the oldest in the history of the Church.

Zechariah **didn't literally break out into song**

(like a Roger's and Hammerstein musical)

but there is little doubt that his **heart was singing.**

And **capturing the spirit of his words of prophetic poetry,**

the **church did not waste time setting the words to music.**

For Roman Catholics, Anglicans and others, this canticle

(one of the three big ones from the Gospels)

is a **regular part of worship services for centuries.**

Like the way our favorite carols draw us into the season,

songs can embolden hopeful words

and **make us come to life.**

But ironically, this song is the product of silence.

It's important to know **Zechariah's story** to get the importance of what's at stake here.

Zechariah was a temple priest

one of dozens who helped do the chores around the Temple,
(like keep the incense burning or playing some small role
in daily worship, perhaps perform smaller sacrifices.)

He was good at his job; a faithful team player,
always on time.

One day, it was his turn to refresh the incense inside the
Holy Place before morning worship began outside.

It wasn't a special holiday or anything:

Just a day like any other day;
a menial task he'd probably done countless times.

But then, in the midst of this "ordinary day", **an angel appears**,
with the news that his wife, Elizabeth,
who was **barren**
and, like Zechariah,
was what the Bible calls "**advanced in years**"
would **become pregnant and bear a son**.

Zechariah surely did not miss the **distinct similarity** with
Abraham and Sarah's miraculous story!

According to the angle, this son is going to be special,
full of the Holy Spirit,
and would help bring Israel back to the Lord;

In other words, he's going to be **another Elijah**,
one of Israel's **great prophets of old**,
who also **reminded Israel** of her first love and drew
people back into relationship with God.

Zechariah, understandably baffled, questions the angel's news,
noting the **distinct hurdle** of age and biology!

The angel assures him this news is directly from God,
and says that because of his doubt,
he will be struck silent.

Meanwhile, the **awaiting crowd is checking their watches**,
wondering what's taking Zechariah so long.

He **staggers out**, unable to speak,
motioning wildly to the Holy Place he just came out of.

They get the gist: On this ordinary day, at the beginning of this
ordinary worship service, he's seen something extraordinary;

A vision from the Lord.

**And as is always the case with God's plan, everything
happened as the angel said:**

Elizabeth became pregnant and bore a son who they named
John.

And the moment Zechariah affirmed that his name would
not be one of the old family names,
but in fact "John",
his lips were loosed.

And his first words:

Thanks and praise to God for the new hope that He is bringing to
His people.

These are not idle words, either.

There is **overwhelming joy** flowing from Zechariah's dry mouth,
for like a wanderer lost in the desert,
he is saturated with the Holy Spirit by the Gospel.

And indeed, Israel herself has been in a parched wilderness for quite some time.

They've endured one conqueror after another ruling over them,
from Babylonians, to Egyptians, to Greeks,
and now the Romans.

It's been nearly 500 years since any real word from God came
from the prophets,

especially concerning God's plans for their future,
and his long foretold Messiah.

But finally! On the horizon, the promise of greener pastures.

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

No, it's been a while, but He hasn't forgotten about us!
God is breaking into what has become the ordinary rhythm
for His people waiting for a word.

*He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David*

The horn is an ancient symbol of power.

This servant of David *will* have the power to save,
unlike previous attempts by Israel to save herself.

Then he lists exactly what God is coming to do:

To show mercy to our ancestors

To remember his holy covenant given to Abraham and Sarah

Indeed, God hasn't forgotten his children, or left them in the
lurch

He remembers that huge promise:

"I will be their God and they will be my people"

To rescue us from our oppressors

To be rid of conquerors and those who use power wrongly.

To enable us to serve him without fear,

To unencumber us from sin
and clothe us in holiness and righteousness

God is coming to

show mercy
remember
rescue
empower

his people.

Overflowing with fatherly pride, Zechariah prophesies about his son's future.

Parents often dream about all their children will accomplish, perhaps even hoping they'll follow in the family business.

But here, John's destiny is clearly laid out:

*You will be a prophet of the Most High
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of sins.*

This is John the Baptist's life in a nutshell:

the all important ministry of setting the stage
for God to step out.

In the theater business, one of the most crucial jobs in seeing that the show goes on is one of the most unseen members of the crew: the stage manager.

She never steps out on stage into the light,

**but stands just out of sight,
telling the actors when it's time to go on,
making sure props get to the right places,
telling the lighting booth when to dim or increase the lights
cuing the curtain to rise and fall.**

She is never seen and yet makes all the preparations so that when the curtain goes up, the story is told smoothly and without a hitch.

John the Baptist sets the stage for Jesus in the hearts and minds of Israel, by preaching this "knowledge of salvation through forgiveness."

That might sound pretty familiar to us modern-day Christians, but **for John's audience, it was utterly revolutionary.**

And yet, people flocked to hear him; to be baptized by him

That God was serious about forgiving sin by repentance, not sacrifice.

There was something so true; so real about his message, that people gravitated toward it.

Their **hearts were drawn inextricably** to the hope of being forgiven by God in Jesus.

And then the moment Jesus steps out from behind the curtain and takes center stage,
John insists that everyone follow him.

And that's saying something since John had amassed a serious following himself!

(Even Paul runs into some John followers in Greece!)

John does this because as Zechariah says, a new day is dawning for the people of God, and it's not about him:

*In the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those living in darkness and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.*

In God, a new day is about to dawn.

Zechariah sees the beams shoot from behind the horizon.

The sun is coming.

And with this new day, God's people will know the love, mercy and peace from God that they've never know.

Indeed, Christmas is a joyous time of song.

God in Jesus Christ breaks into our ordinary lives to bring the Gospel,

the way the way the angel shattered Zechariah's normal day.

The question is, what song shall we sing with our lives?

I'm not talking about getting to do our favorite carols or playing our favorite Christmas CDs.

Are we going to be like Zechariah and find our hearts so full to bursting with the joy and love of Christ that we cannot contain ourselves?

Or will we sing a song of fear and bitterness?

John fulfilled his purpose boldly and faithfully,
and his reward was arrest and senseless execution.

What if we sang a song of mercy,
forgiving that someone in our family and reconciling
relationship?

What if we sang a song of rescue, rearranged our focus, made it
less about giving gifts we don't need
to giving to an organization changing the lives of children
around the world?

What if we sang a song of service, gave time to local ministry
that connects us to the least fortunate or help a neighbor with
yard work?

***These would be the truest, most courageous Christmas songs
we could sing.***

Because we are John the Baptist too:

We are called to share the knowledge of salvation

The good news that God has not forgotten us here on earth

That He keeps his promise to look after us
That Jesus still forgives sins and sets people free.

Will this be the dawn of a new day for you,
where you let the forgiveness and mercy of Christ meet you
and put a song in your heart?