



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Zechariah”

Sing in Exultation Sermon Series Part I

Luke 1:67-79

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You and your companion squeeze by two other couples to get to your assigned seats in the Shaftman Performance Hall. You nod hello to the person to your right and then smile at your companion in acknowledgement that despite the delay at the restaurant, you’re on time for the *Classical Connections* concert. Tonight’s program includes pieces by Mozart, Bach, and Haydn. Your timing ends up being good because it is not long before a voice is heard offering a welcome, making announcements and requesting that phones be silenced. Then, the curtain rises and the orchestra is revealed. The musicians tune their instruments. Then the conductor is welcomed with applause. After bowing, he turns to face the orchestra and lifts his baton. (Pause) Silence. You wait for the music to begin.

Though the silence lasts only a few moments, it is one of the things that sets a live performance apart from a recorded one. Never before and never again will the pieces be played as they will be played tonight. The silence is anticipation.

Imagine attending a concert like this a couple of hundred years ago before technology could deliver professional performances on demand. You love music and have saved up for this 223 mile trip to the big city auditorium where you will hear Mozart, Bach, and Haydn—pieces you’ve studied but have never heard performed. In fact, you’ve never heard of a professional orchestra before. You have brought the silence of a lifetime to the program. When the conductor raises his baton, the anticipation is almost more than you can bear.



There is a long silence before the song of our passage. For nine months, Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, has been unable to speak—much less sing. He's been mute since the day he heard the announcements.

Let's go back to that last day of his speaking. On that day, Zechariah has the rare honor of being the priest who burns incense at the Temple altar. When he lights the candles, he is supposed to be alone, so it is quite a shock to discover that he has company—

- a visitor—
- an angel with a name,
 - Gabriel.

“**I have good news**,” Gabriel announces as Zechariah trembles, and then tells of two things that are too wonderful to believe. First, Elizabeth, Zechariah's elderly wife who is far beyond child-bearing years, is pregnant. *Impossible!*

Second, their son will be a prophet who will announce the coming of the long-awaited messiah. *Also impossible!* It seems that way, anyway. Zechariah has lived too long in a world dominated by Roman rule *to believe what he believes*; God's messiah is coming to restore Israel to glory.

Unable to *take in* this impossible news, Zechariah has no joy to *let out*. Doubt is his only response. So, Gabriel renders him mute. Zechariah will not speak until his son is born—until he has joy to release.

Some say that Zechariah's silence is a punishment. I think it is a gift. He is given an *Advent of Preparation* so he will be able to sing in exultation.

Listen to when the silence is broken, the day his son is born:

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his child David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be *saved from our enemies* and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
in his presence all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,



the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

“Headspace.” Headspace is now such a common expression that it is one word, not two. When Zechariah’s son is born, he is in a headspace very different from when he heard that Elizabeth was pregnant. Back then, he couldn’t believe Elizabeth could bear a child, and certainly couldn’t believe that their son will be a prophet who will announce the coming of Israel’s messiah. Now, despite the fact that the world seems not to have changed in those nine months, he now believes what Gabriel told him—so strongly in fact, he can’t help but sing.

How did Zechariah get to his new headspace?

Through the *instruction of silence*.

“I’ve begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it,” said Chaim Potok, Potok wrote a novel, *The Chosen*, to illustrate just that. A rabbi father sees that his brilliant young son, Danny, too readily believes his own opinions are conclusions. Empathy does not come easily for him. So, the rabbi imposes silences between himself and Danny, speaking only to discuss the Talmud and its meaning. The father seems harsh. But when Danny is grown, he is grateful for the silences, and uses silences in his own counseling practice.

I won’t call what the rabbi did good parenting, but I had a teacher like him that I came to appreciate. Every year, on the first day of his *Introduction to Theology* class, Dr. John Leith gave the same short speech. He said that we might think that he would want us to share our theological opinions. “Don’t” he said. We needed to learn the tradition first. “Ask questions if you must, but keep your opinions to yourself

I love classroom conversations, but in an *Introduction to Theology* class when we had so much to learn, I became grateful that we did not spend time listening to the unformed and uninformed opinions of first level students.

Silence can be a neglected instructor because it can be a harsh teacher. It robs one of a terrific defense against hearing what you don’t want to hear. Keep talking to avoid listening. And when you have to listen to the other, be thinking of what you’re going to say next to drown out what they are saying. But true silence doesn’t demand that you agree with what you hear, but it does make you consider it.

But Zachariah’s story is about more defensive talking. The instruction of his silence isn’t about drowning out truths he doesn’t want to hear. It is about stopping and make him sit with the good news he wants to hear but can’t believe can be true;

- that he and his wife would have a child—
- that Israel’s messiah will come
even with Israel so divided and so not deserving the messiah to come.

An angel did deliver the news so I guess,



- intellectually he thinks these things can happen,
- maybe in principle, he thinks these things can happen.
- for the sake of the community that looks to him as a priest, he thinks these things can happen,

but his headspace won't allow him to truly accept it. He was too disappointed with what Rome is about, what his religion is about, to trust that God will send a Savior right now. He needed time before he could sing.

“Headspace.” Here's a headspace we all get in sometimes because we're wired to believe bad news and distrust good news. It those times when we believe that the *worst read* on what's going on in life has to be the right one.

- “Slavery has lasted for hundreds of years, so it will always be with us.”
- “I'll don't have grandchildren when I thought I would so I never will.”
- “The Berlin Wall hasn't fallen so it will always stand.”
- “She hasn't forgiven me so she will never will.”

Life can take a terrible thing one rightfully thinks, “It will never be the same again,” but then think it is equally true that, “It will never be good again.”

- I'll never love another as much as I loved the one I lost,
- I'll never trust anyone again after having been betrayed,
 - My divided community will never heal,
 - My lost faith in God can never be regained.

That last one gets close to the priest, Zechariah. Zechariah had faith in God—he was a priest and lit those candles of hope in the Temple after all—but lacked trust that God is actually going to change things. His headspace was that the world will forever be defined by an emperor in Rome, a Jewish king in Jerusalem, and the poor and powerless will always live on the edge.

Zechariah needed the instruction of silence for the Holy Spirit to do her work and help him

- See past Caesar and see God again,
- see past cruelty and see kindness again,
- see past inequity and see a strong community again.

The Spirit works in silence to help him accept the impossible birth of his son as a sign of a new world dawning even though nothing has seemed to have changed.

Victor Frankl—many of you have heard of him—was an Austrian neurologist. He wrote the magnificent book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, where he reflected on wisdom he gained while living in



Nazi concentration camps. He wanted to explain to the world how he found hope and joy even in the camps. He said it was the silence that saved him.

- Silences helped him remember how life is meant to be lived beyond the walls.
- Silences helped him realize that while so many things are beyond his control, he can control how he responds.
- Silences helped him reject how his German guards saw him and remember how those who loved him saw him.

He embraced the instruction of silence because it gave him the truth where he could recognize the lie of what the camps were meant to convey to him.

Luke sees God is in those silences. He sees silence as the space where the Holy Spirit does her work. Within the classroom of silence, Zechariah's faith is reconstructed. The one who kept the rituals of faith but lost confidence in God working salvation regains the faith of a child who can sing with awe and wonder. He has the headspace of someone for whom God's love is *miraculously real* despite the circumstances of his times. He sings as someone so convinced of God's reign that he sings as if Israel's messiah has already come, that God has already saved Israel from her enemies and brought relief from all that burdens Israel's people. For him, the miracle of the saving grace of God is *as real* as what he can see right in front of him:

Elizabeth, too old to have children, uses her arthritic hands to hold their son close to her chest.

Zechariah now sees what others around him are still too disillusioned to see and that is why he now can sing—because he can't help it, and because he wants others to hear it.

Next November, Dr. Andy Root will come to Second Presbyterian to give the Edmunds Lectures. Andy is very clear that we now live in a secular age where even people of faith are tempted to doubt what they believe and, given church scandals, doubt that the church can make a difference. He doesn't think that all we can do is light candles of hope to keep flickering faith going. No, he wants us to see that despite the secular spirit of our times, we can still see God working reconciliation among us. And we can sing of it; not to prove anything but to witness to what we know somehow is true.

And when we are not in the headspace to see God's work and God's transforming power of grace, then perhaps we need the classroom of silence, so we do not talk ourselves into despair and convince ourselves that our doubts are conclusions. We can let silence be a practice of prayerful company with God's Spirit

- as we remember blessings
- and note the evidence of the good around us,
- and remember the potential for good in others,



- and as we think of ourselves as God sees us and not as we are seen by those who wish to manipulate us.

Maybe we can use the classroom of silence to teach our hearts how to again sing in exultation.

Charge:

I don't want to you leave here thinking I am naïve. I know that silences can be isolating, and that in them you can spiral down as well as spiral up. But let me tell you about a conversation I had after the first service. Someone came out and said, "I'm an introvert and I love my silences." Well, I'm an introvert too and I said to her, "What some don't understand about us is that introverts are not isolated and alone in their silences. They bring their relationships into them." Maybe introverts can teach us what Luke is trying to teach us: that silences can be a form of prayer where we have unexpected company: the Holy Spirit. And that Spirit can help us not spiral down into isolated despair but spiral up into the healing company of God.

