

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80
Ellen Crawford True
December 22, 2019

How Silently

This morning's text comes from the very beginning of the gospel of Luke. Before we meet shepherds and angels, before we greet Mary and her baby boy, we are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth. We are told that these two claim a heritage we should recognize by now. Their "23 and Me" profile would tell us that they share DNA with many if not all of God's children we have met this fall. As Luke begins his telling, we are reminded that the Temple has been restored, that many of the exiles eventually made their way home. Zechariah and Elizabeth trace their lineage to two of the priestly families, they are heirs of the temple tradition passed down for generations. So a certain order has been restored; the life of ritual and worship has begun again, and yet all is not well. The Assyrians and the Babylonians are no longer a threat on the threshold, but Rome now occupies Jerusalem, and Herod, a puppet king sits on the throne. And Zechariah and Elizabeth are childless.

Still there is a certain peaceful rhythm to life in Jerusalem for this elderly woman and her priest husband, and this day of all days brings Zechariah to a once in a lifetime moment. It is his turn to enter the sanctuary and conduct the incense offering. Today he is the one designated to lead this service on behalf of the people and to return to them to offer a blessing. The text doesn't tell us when he is chosen, but I imagine his heart racing with butterflies in his stomach as he begins his service, because he has waited a lifetime for this moment. [Read Luke 1:5-25,57-80]

I confess that a bit of the Grinch rears its head in me every Advent and Christmas season because of the noise, "the noise, noise, noise, noise." It's not really the sound of carols on Muzak or squealing children or any of the other sounds in the air. It's honestly the sounds of the season

out there combined with the noise that bubbles up in here. And this year it has grown particularly loud because there are other sounds in the mix, the weeping of separated children and parents, the sirens responding to surging fires in Australia, not to mention the heightened rhetoric a couple of hours down the road in Washington, rhetoric amplified by every phone, television, and newspaper in the land. Dave played a newly released version of “Silent Night” for me a few days ago. It is an updated version of one recorded by Simon & Garfunkel a few years back. While two women sing the familiar hymn, a voice reads the headlines. While I appreciate the haunting beauty of the two things paired together, I have to admit that in that moment it sounded dissonant rather than poignant. It was hard to hear anything other than noise; it was hard to hear anything other than the headlines. These days it is often difficult to hear anything other than the noise. And so I find my Grinchy self envying Zechariah’s moment in the sanctuary. What must it have been like to step alone into that holy space, into the quiet to offer incense and spend a noiseless moment with God?

The quiet moment does not last long though. Zechariah is greeted by the angel Gabriel. He is “terrified and fear overwhelm[s] him,” which is the standard biblical response to an angel’s appearance. And Gabriel brings astonishing news. Elizabeth and Zechariah will have a child who will be the one who prepares the people for the coming of the Lord. And Zechariah’s first response is disbelief. This one who is entrusted with the keeping of the tradition, with remembering the story, this one whose very name means, “God remembers” cannot bring himself to remember the story of God’s repeated faithfulness throughout his people’s history. Zechariah finds himself unable to trust that the God who remembered Abraham and Sarah, the God who remembered the Hebrew people when they were enslaved in Egypt, the God who brought the Israelites home from exile could possibly remember an aging priest and his grey-

haired wife, too. Mary will wonder *how* it is possible. Zechariah doubts that a new beginning is possible at all, struggles to comprehend that new life can come through him. And yet he is one of the stewards, one of God's trusted story bearers. He has been telling the story for years, decades even. Perhaps the noise of occupation and disappointment have drowned out the story for Zechariah; perhaps fear gets the best of him, fear of rocking the boat, fear of trusting that the thing he has longed for for himself, for his wife, for his people can actually come to pass; or perhaps the story he knows so well no longer feels like it is still his. So Gabriel responds to Zechariah's disbelief with the silent treatment. Zechariah is rendered unable to speak until the promised child is born.

Can you imagine? As one colleague pointed out, Zechariah is a preacher who cannot talk, for nine months or so. How does that work? I get frustrated and stressed out when I have laryngitis for a few days. The thought of nine months makes my pulse race. Zechariah is supposed to come back out to the people gathered outside the sanctuary and offer a blessing. He is the one who is supposed to have the words, and all he can offer is silence.

We are not told much about the ensuing nine months, at least not what Zechariah does during that time. Elizabeth accepts the blessing with grace and gratitude, thanking God for removing her shame. She will welcome her cousin Mary, and the child Elizabeth is carrying will leap in her womb when Mary comes near. But Zechariah is quiet, he has nothing to say for three-fourths of a year, which leads me to wonder what he hears when he cannot speak, when he can only listen.

I recently read the story behind the carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." As you may know the lyrics were originally a poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow is remembered as a poet and literary critic, but on Christmas Day 1863, he was also

a widowed father of six children, one of whom was in the hospital in Washington recovering from a life-threatening injury received on a Civil War battlefield. Longfellow heard bells ringing and voices singing about peace on earth, and yet the world around him told a different story, one of violence, division, and heartbreak:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong, And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”¹

Longfellow—not unlike Zechariah, knew disappointment and despair intimately. He saw clearly that the declaration of peace of earth rang hollow while a nation fought against itself. And yet as he continued to listen he heard a different story underneath the rumble of the cannon:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”²

¹ Justin Taylor, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-story-of-pain-and-hope-behind-i-heard-the-bells-on-christmas-day/>

² Taylor

God's promise of peace is louder than the gunfire and stronger than death strewn on the battlefield. God's saving ways are fiercer than all of Rome's armies combined. Henry comes to understand this as he quietly listens to church bells. It seems that Zechariah remembers this, too as he waits with his own silence for his child to be born.

Zechariah's first words after the birth—and after he confirms that yes, Elizabeth has given the child the correct name—are words of pure joyous praise for the God who was and is and will be. It is as though Zechariah had to be silent to remember the story, the story of God's saving ways, the story of God's untiring faithfulness. It is as though he had to be quiet in order to recognize that this story is not only still his but also his family's and his people's, too. In silencing Zechariah's voice, Gabriel clears the way for God's voice to be heard, and maybe the voices of some others as well.

And so on this fourth Sunday of Advent, as the whirl of Christmas gains steam, as the war of words reaches a new decibel, as the voices in my head and my heart fight for airtime, I have this sense that Gabriel is tapping me on the shoulder and begging me to be quiet, to listen more than I talk. Yes, there are times when we are called to speak up for those who have been long ignored, but there are also times for those of us with a voice to be quiet so that the voices we tune out or silence—including God's—can speak for themselves. And when I am quiet, perhaps I can once again hear the story I somehow forgot, the story I have known all along. If I can find a way to be quiet and listen I will hear Zechariah remind me:

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.³

There is no crescendo ahead of the dawn's breaking; there is no drumroll to announce the light's coming into the world. Maybe it is time for me to be quiet so that I can see and even hear its coming. Then—and only then can I, too, declare with all that is in me that the dawn has indeed broken and is breaking, for us and for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Luke 1:78-79