

Luke 1:67-79  
*Zechariah's Song: A Monologue\**  
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I can tell you my story now—in fact, you can hardly shut me up now, but it's been a rocky road getting here.

I'm not looking for sympathy, but put yourself in my sandals—a priest without children. I could see it in people's eyes: wondering if there were some secret sin for which the Lord had made me and my wife barren. I could almost hear them saying, “And he is considered a spiritual leader?” Not sure if it was just my insecurity talking there, but it plagued me.

Gabriel said that God heard my prayers? Let me tell you about those prayers. I prayed the psalms of vindication: Psalm 35, verses 17-26, and Psalm 43, verses 1-4. I had stopped praying for a child, and my prayers had become focused on wanting the respect of the community. These were prayers of unrest; I did not know what it meant to rest in the Lord. Can you feel the irony here? I sensed that people didn't think I was spiritually strong enough to be a priest, and I let these feelings get to me. Of course that undermined my walk with God.

And then—and then I was vindicated! The lot fell to me and I was chosen to go to into the holy of holies. The lot was God's voice, saying, “You are my chosen one; you will represent me in this special way.” What a delight, what a privilege! And do you want to know what the real highlight was? It was my moment of vindication, my moment of showing the world that I deserved to be priest—coming out afterward and pronouncing the blessing. I, who had been as close to the face of God as one can be on this earth, would come out of the holy of holies into the courtyard. My face would be glowing, and I would raise my hands, slowly and with dignity, and pronounce those wonderful words of blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” I would look into the people's eyes as I pronounced those words of benediction, and I would see my vindication.

I was picturing the benediction scene in my mind when suddenly an angel was there with me. This was not in the game plan! There I was, in the holy of holies, basking in the presence of God, and the angel said, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. . . .” He told me that Elizabeth and I would have a son, a very special son. That was too much for me. I just wanted vindication; I wasn't sure I wanted a son anymore. Was this real? I said, “How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are old.” The angel was not impressed. He declared, “Because you didn't believe, you will be silent, unable to speak until the day this happens.”

I wanted to argue with him, but my voice had left me. And then it hit me—my vindication was gone. My moment of vindication, the blessing that I would pronounce—

that wasn't going to happen. I had been closer to the presence of God than I had ever imagined was possible, but I would not be able to share that glory with the congregation. I would not be able to look into their eyes and know that my prayers for vindication had been answered.

The weirdest part was going home to Elizabeth. As you can imagine, it took a while to get her to understand what had happened. She's one good woman, and I could tell she felt bad for me. But she had this gleam in her eye when I wrote down the angel's words for her, and, to be honest, I don't think she minded all that much that I could not speak. I think she was a bit tired of all my whining about vindication.

Can you imagine not talking for a year? Imagine going through the next year without ever saying a word? I couldn't imagine it. To me it seemed to be a cruel and unusual punishment.

But let me tell you, it changed my prayer life. The psalms of vindication were gone, and just one verse from the psalms took their place: "Be still and know that I am God." For a whole year, I pondered that one sentence over and over again. It was as if the words had become permanently engraved on my heart. I would wake up in the morning and the song would begin again [sing]: "Be still . . ."

Let me tell you what happens when that song fills your heart for a whole year. You begin to see God in places you had never seen him before. I would wake up, and the song would begin as I looked at Elizabeth, still sleeping beside me, and I would pray, "Holy Lord God, thank you for this woman, this godly woman who for years has courageously shared with me the grief of our childlessness and now shares the joy of this blessing of life on the way."

Then I would walk into the courtyard of our home and pray, "Holy Lord God, I thank you that this is the day that you have made. You created the morning star that is now fading as the sun readies to rise; you ride on the wings of the clouds as if they are your chariot; you water the fields and feed the animals. Thank you for your provision day by day."

I would gather with the worshiping community, but my principal task of teaching had been silenced. For thirty years I had instructed these people in the law of God, and now, for one year, I was on a forced sabbatical from teaching. What use was I to anyone? I would sit overlooking the congregation and pray, "Holy Lord God, you know each one gathered here intimately—and you walk with each one. Help me to know them as you know them." I would look into the eyes of each worshiper and see in those eyes hope, longing, pain, sorrow, repentance, or hardness of heart, and I would pray for each one by name, asking for the blessing of the Lord to flourish in the lives of each person, each home, each clan. I saw God working in people's lives in ways I had never seen before. And I also saw into people's hearts in ways I had never seen before. Not surprisingly, I saw in my own heart things I had never known were there—and it wasn't pretty.

But as I kept singing "Be still and know that I am God," and as I saw my own heart with

its petty desires for vindication and its inability to trust God's promise of a son and its great anxieties about my qualities for spiritual leadership—the more I looked into my own heart, the more my heart was flooded with the peace of the Lord. It was as if the blessing that I was unable to pronounce needed an entire year to work its way through my own anxious, harried, unable-to-rest heart, so that the Lord could turn his face toward me and fill me with his peace. Does that make any sense to you?

Am I thankful for this year of silence? In truth I am, but I would never want to repeat it. Just imagine what it's like to walk through a pregnancy with your lover after thirty-five years of marriage and not be able to talk about it. Imagine what it's like to teach for thirty years and then not be able to utter one word to encourage the people of God. All my life I have prayed out loud as a good Jew—and now a year of almost constant prayer has passed in which I could not make a single sound. Would I want to do it again? Absolutely not.

But the Lord has blessed my year of silence beyond all measuring. My anxious heart—let's be honest—there's still anxiety in there. Will I live long enough to see my son grow into adulthood? How do you raise someone who has been given a special calling by the Lord himself? Yes, there's enough anxiety in my heart to last for the rest of my lifetime. But that anxiety is now surrounded by a peace that comes from the Lord, a peace that knows that God is sovereign. I've learned that God's power can be made perfect through my weakness. He is my rest, my shepherd.

I can taste and see that God is good every day as I take the time to be aware of his leading in my life and in the life of this little community.

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\* Hielema, Syd. "Zechariah's Story: A Monologue." *Reformed Worship Magazine*. September 2012, No. 105: p. 15-17.