

Luke 1:67-79  
Expectancy  
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Last week, we listened and watched as young Mary, probably not more than 14 or 15, received news no one in her situation could have expected. But it was her cousin Elizabeth (and the baby inside her) that allowed Mary to see the goodness of the news. Then Mary was able to sing out in gratitude: **My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.**

This week, we meet another person who received a word, but who came away speechless—the priest, Zechariah.

In the ancient Latin, it's called the Benedictus because of the first word of Zechariah's prayer, "Blessed be," *Benedictus*, which literally means to speak well, or well spoken. This story is an invitation to speak well, to offer a good word with your words and with your life.

In Advent, we recognize that there are words all around us. People are talking this time of year: cheer, happiness, well-wishing. There are lots of messages around us and many messages inside us. But are we able to hear the words of the message God intends for us to hear?

This Advent, we are listening to the prayers uttered by the characters in Luke's gospel. We're doing so with the intent of growing from them so that we too might be attentive and watchful for the signs of hope around us.

But what happens when there are no words to be spoken? Can a good word come in the form of silence? What we're going to see first is what I'm calling the silent benediction. To get that, we need to look at a bit of the back story, from Luke 1 starting at verse 5. It says that Zechariah is a priest, meaning he's a descendent of Aaron, the first priest. So Zechariah is in the lineage of Aaron's 24 offspring who made up the body of priests in Israel. Scholars tell us that there were probably about 18,000 local priests throughout Israel.

But there was one temple. So they would cast lots to see who would be chosen to offer sacrifices in the inner sanctum of the Temple. You could only be chosen once in your lifetime, and even that was a pretty unlikely thing. But on this day, this day, Zechariah chose the short straw. Today was Zechariah's day, and what an honor to bestow upon a person: to go into the inner courts of the temple to the altar of incense and burn incense to represent the prayers of the people offered to Yahweh.

Outside, scores of people would gather yearning to receive a word, a blessing, a *Benedictus* from the priest. Like the one we read and hear from Numbers 6, Aaron's blessing: "May the Lord Bless you and keep you..." So the people would have pressed in on the doors offering their prayers, awaiting the time when the priest would emerge with a word of blessing for them. Only this time, when Zechariah emerges, he has no word, he has only silence—and some really effective hand-gestures.

Nothing...silence. But Luke says that the people realized that he had seen a vision.

This was the one thing every member of the priestly body yearned to do, to speak a good word with their life to their people. But Zechariah had no words. While he was inside the temple, he had an encounter with an angel standing next to the altar of incense: “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.” Like many of us, Zechariah brought in all of his worries, hopes, and fears to the place of prayer.

How many of us bring to church a plate of thoughts, concerns, hopes, anticipations that we try to balance during our worship? The answer: all of us. Honestly, how many of you this morning even, have had the thought enter your mind, *I wonder how so and so is doing? You know, I haven’t seen them, I wonder if they’re doing ok.* Or, *I wonder if we’re going to have enough to cover all of the demands of the holiday season.* We all have these thoughts, and it’s often next to these that we hear and place God’s Word. We balance God’s word to us with our lists.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have no children. It’s been their number one prayer for decades. Zechariah knows it and God definitely knows it. That’s what he brought with him.

So when Gabriel said: “Z, you and your wife are going to have a baby.” Zechariah hears it alongside his reserved, realistic, even doubting prayer. And how does Zechariah respond? “How do I know it?”

And I love this, the angel responds: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. So that you, Zechariah, know that this good word is from God, you will not be able to speak until the good news comes.”

Zechariah will be unable to speak. Or, another way of saying it, Zechariah loses his voice. What is it like to lose our voice? To come to a place in our lives when we are no longer able to speak or have a voice? Maybe it’s in our retirement. You know, *I used to have people who would listen to me, but now I don’t know who cares.* Or maybe in our youth: *I feel like because of my age I am not taken seriously, even though I know I have good things to share in my community or in my workplace.* Do I have anything to say? And does anyone care?

How’s your voice?

On social media, do you feel the need to be heard, and so write and comment, and then wait for people to offer that most base of all human validation—the Facebook like. Do I have enough likes? Is anyone paying attention? Am I being heard?

Do you see how tempting it is to find our meaning in life, our purpose in what we are able to say—or in another matter of speaking, what we do? Zechariah was defined and validated in his priestly role by his ability to step out from the misty inner courts of the temple and pronounce a blessing. To speak a good word. And now he’s mute, unable to say anything.

But how does a person lose their voice? Well, for Zechariah, maybe he and Elizabeth got married and they believed that like many, they too would soon start a family. Then as time goes on, they pray, and pray, and pray. Year by year, decade by decade, they pray and still nothing. And somewhere along the line, their prayers become less bold and more cautious—they are trying to protect their hearts from being broken even further. They protect God from the high expectations they might still be tempted to place on God. They’ve come to believe that you can’t expect God to

care too much about your individual situation, you can't expect too much from God, because that's just not the way it works. So, instead just offer safe, reliable prayers; at least then you can't get hurt if God chooses not to answer them.

But do you see that it is at precisely the moment when we think that we have a predictable, manageable God that we lose our voice? God could never surprise us, would never astound us, does not transcend us in anyway. When we have that God, all that we can say of ourselves is all that we can say. Let me repeat that, when you have a God who you believe is incapable or unwilling to astound, surprise, or transcend us in anyway, the *most* we can say of ourselves is the most that *we* can say.

We don't have a benediction. We don't have a good world. A benediction, this word that surrounds you, infuses you, draws you forward with the knowledge that God is still speaking.

But then we move through to the second act of this drama, in which Zechariah receives a reliable word. Zechariah pronounces a blessing. But he was only given to speak it after he had spent time in silence waiting with no ability to verbalize. All he could do is sit in observant silence watching and waiting as the promise, the gift, grew in his wife's belly. He literally watched as the promise which had eluded him and Elizabeth for so long grew before him, and during his silence I know that Zechariah took time to reflect upon his prayers—his predictable, manageable, heartless prayers.

We also see as we skip over to verses 68 and following that Zechariah spent time in the word as he prayed, seeing how God was still offering the promise of a savior who would come out of the house of David, David the unpredictable last born of Jesse, who was anointed. One who was spoken of by the prophets, notably Samuel who himself was born in the most unpredictable of ways, to a mother Hannah who herself was barren and distraught, and through God's great mercy gave her a son who would be the first in a line of prophets who showed mercy to their ancestors. And remember Abraham and Sarah; they too were without a child and God came to them and said: even in your old age you will have a son, and through your offspring you will change the course of the entire history of humanity.

Because God has more to say. God has more to say about the lives of Abraham and Sarah, Hannah, Jesse, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And if your prayers have become safe, guarded, unassuming, I want to say to you that God has so much more to say to you.

Is God predictable? Absolutely not. Is God reliable? In every way, without exception. Our God is unpredictably reliable. He can raise our expectations, if we're able to see and hear. But with all the advice and plans that we give God, we're so often unable to be quiet long enough to hear that still small word of assurance and hope—just trust me, I'm reliable, I've got more to say about you than you can say for yourself.

In verse 78, Zechariah says: **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.**

Advent is the time when we are invited to acknowledge that we live and remain in that darkness. Mercy doesn't come to those who have it all together, it comes to those who have the courage to know that our lives are a mess and are surrounded by darkness. It could be the darkness of

desperation for what is happening around us. It could be the darkness of choices we made that have impacted the lives of those around us. It could be the darkness of habits that keep us from deep relationship. It could be the darkness of despair that that prayer will go unanswered.

But to these who sit in the stillness before dawn, a light from on high is coming.

You ever go outside in a broad place, on a mountain or wide prairie, and wait for sunrise? First, you see that deep blue of light beginning to emerge, then you see the reds and oranges as the first light begins to break, then there is this moment when those beams flood the sky and begin to warm and illuminate, and the darkness is chased away.

Advent is the time when we wait for the breaking of the dawn, when it's no longer that the *most* we can say about ourselves is the most *we* can say. The Advent of Christ's birth, when Jesus' light bursts forth into our lives, we are reminded in that moment, Now your lives have so much more value, so much more meaning, so much more beauty, because God chose to be with us, to redeem us from our sins by giving himself for us on a cross. God has chosen to say so much more to you, but we cannot hear those promises without stopping to wait, and watch, and hope with expectancy.

God has spoken his Benedictus, his good word into our lives. Let that resound in your hearts and minds this Advent. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.