

“Zechariah’s Song” Advent 2 a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
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**Luke 1:5-25** In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’

THE EVANGELIST LUKE, of all the Gospel writers, is a preacher. Indeed, he is also an historian; he sees with an historian’s eye, always referencing the larger context in which the material unfolds, and giving broad, accurate structure to the narrative. And he is a theologian, revealing major themes of the relation of church to synagogue, of Jesus to church, and of the church to the larger world; the authority of scripture; the meaning of discipleship. to name by a few. But as a preacher, Luke offers a style and form, in which one part of his gospel leads one to anticipate another part. Fully drawn characters, plot details, concrete images, and dramatic actions keep the story alive. And his use of narrative indirectly but indubitably invites listeners to make their own connections, their own entry to the story.

Where do you fit in this first story of Luke’s gospel? Let’s look at it.

Luke begins at the beginning. This is a perfect Advent reading because there are 80 verses in chapter 1, and the Holy Child is not yet born!

Details are important. But Luke does not want us to move too swiftly through the narrative. He wants us to savor new stories that are really old stories.

Only Luke tells us the names of John's parents and that they are both of the priestly line of Aaron, first described back in first Chronicles. Elizabeth, barren in her old age, comes from a rich tradition – Sarah, Rebecca, Rachael, Hannah. As has happened before, an old childless couple is now to have a child, a routine service at the altar becomes a God-filled moment; God turns to the simple and powerless to bring in an era of justice and mercy. God will again put an heir on the throne of David, the one John will announce.

Luke's description of the angel Gabriel's visit fits the pattern of Gabriel's earlier visit to Daniel: appearance, fear, message, and the recipient stricken speechless. Many of the songs are composed of biblical phrases and lines, tying in Old and New Testament references so that, for example, John's ministry becomes Elijah's ministry Mary's song is Hannah's song; the boy Jesus in the temple is the boy Samuel in the temple.

Slow down and take note, Luke says, the old is ushering in the new, the miracles are in the details, and that it is God's initiative of grace and power, God's favor to the world, that will bring about salvation.

Luke sets his stage. Then comes the main character: A foolish, doubting old man, one who well knows the Hebrew scriptures, but is struck speechless because he could not believe that God might once again be active, that God might be working within the very institutions and practices that will soon be challenged.

"It's not possible that God could act in my life in that way." He cries. At their age! Preposterous! He must have been outraged. Or maybe he was scared. Or maybe he got an instant image of The feel of a sleeping child on his chest as he rocked him to sleep. The probing questions about life that only a child could ask. A small trusting hand in his as he walked to the village. He was afraid to trust the good news, and so he denied it.

Can you enter this story? I certainly can. What are the circumstances that cause you to silence your own voice when you have the opportunities to speak to people in power?

What have you been asked to accept, to surrender to, to believe with a illogical but courageous faith? When did fear last get in your way?

When I become fearful doubting Zechariah I remember his penalty, and I pray:  
Oh God, My voice is yours,  
Give me the courage to use it.  
Oh God, My will is yours.  
Help me to bend it to your call.  
And be with me when I fail to do either.

Well Elizabeth finally gives birth, and the family gathers for the circumcision and naming of the child. Only the expected bestowal of the father's name is not to be. Elizabeth says "John," and despite objections from the family, Zechariah affirms that choice. Zechariah acknowledges the angel's instruction and instantly, his power of speech returns.

Instantly, with the intensity of restoration and an awareness of the mystery of the ways of God, Zachariah bursts into inspired prophesy praising God that the Jewish hopes will be fulfilled, that promises will be kept, and his child will indeed herald a Savior, "The morning sun from heaven will rise on us," he concludes.

Can you remember a time when you recovered your voice, your faith, after faltering? When did you manage to speak out or reach out or step out? Consider what gave you the will to not only to want to speak, but actually do it, not only to want to belief and trust, but to actually do it.

This text says that this is the way we begin our preparations for the coming of our Christ. Zechariah is us, we are part of a long line of people who doubt and disobey, but people who manage to return to God, to recover and renew faith, because ultimately God is always gracious. When it comes to preparing for "a church as generous and just as God's grace," there's also always something we can be doing, and Advent is a reminder that we are *always* to be about the process of preparing to receive Christ more deeply in our lives.

Have we left room in our plans for the unexpected? Have we left room, not only for "baby Jesus" who will warm our hearts, but for the grown up Jesus whose teaching and ministry and very being will change the world? Are we like Zechariah and Elizabeth, older, set in our ways, comfortable (if not lonely) in our lot in life and yet, against all odds, making room for the most unusual news ever. For them, 25 years earlier would have been perfect - but it didn't happen that way. God does not always appear on our schedule - are we ready for the unusual, and unsettling ways in which the good news might come to us this year? Are we willing to be unsettled, embarrassed and inconvenienced by it?

Guide our steps in the way of peace, sings Zechariah.

What we need is a new perception and understanding of Peace. What about a peace that strengthens us from the inside-out to live with and grow with our present struggle? What about a peace that enables us to move to a whole new level of connection with creation? Instead of immersing ourselves in the whirling madness of our world - instead of losing ourselves in endless expectations of perfection - instead of hiding behind the incessant blaming of ourselves and others - how about STOPPING - letting go of impossible agendas - and accepting instead to the impossible things that God's love leads us to do.

When our hope is rooted in God and God's future, we can be at peace because we know who holds the future. And we are confident that we can trust God with our future.

May it be so.