

Zechariah's Song: Singing for Justice

Luke 1:67-80

Dec. 10, 2023 Second Sunday of Advent

Series: *Symbols and Songs for the Season: Waiting with Hope*

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Zechariah, John's father, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

*"Blessed are you, the Most High God of Israel—
for you have visited and redeemed your people.
You have raised up a mighty savior for us
of the house of David,
as you promised through the mouths of your holy ones,
the prophets of ancient times:
salvation from our enemies and from the hands of all our foes.
You have shown mercy to our ancestors
by remembering the holy Covenant you made with them,
and the oath you swore to Sarah and Abraham,
granting that we,
delivered from the hands of our enemies,
might serve you without fear, in holiness and justice,
in your presence all our days.*

*And you, my child, will be called
the prophet of the Most High,
for you'll go before our God
to prepare the way for the Promised One,
giving the people the knowledge of salvation
through forgiveness of their sins.
Such is the tender mercy of our God,
who from on high will bring the Rising Sun to visit us,
to give light to those who live
in darkness and the shadow of death
and to guide our feet
into the way of peace."*

The Inclusive Bible Luke 1:67-79

Let's start at the beginning. Here are the first verses of the gospel of Luke. Luke 1:1-4 says,

"Since many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, using what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us, I too, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, have decided to write a carefully ordered account for you, most honorable

Theophilus, so that you may have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received."

In other words, - Here is where the story of God coming to be with us begins, lover of God. There once was this old priest in the hill country...

Zechariah. He doesn't show up on Christmas eve. He barely makes an appearance in our Advent texts. You and I would most likely agree that he's not really central to the story. But Luke begins with him. Luke starts the whole story of Jesus, and the reign of God, and what it is that God is doing in the world, of God coming in, with an old priest in the hill country.

Clearly the story of the Holy One could happen without him, he's not really that important. He doesn't even say or do anything through most of it. And yet, in his rounds of delivering messages from God, the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah first.

As Kara Root writes in her sermon, he seems marginal – but then we see they're all marginal, really, a random Galilean carpenter, a young girl not yet married, rural shepherds in a field, foreign scholars far away. This story is loaded with bit characters. Not a box office draw leading lady or man among them. (1)

So why begin with him? Zechariah's life was humming along on a trajectory, fulfilling what purpose he understood and contributing in all the ways a life does, there was no indication of, or even great desire for, change. Until God decided to invade the ordinary. Here it begins.

That's not where other biblical storytellers start the story of God coming in. In fact, no other gospel does. But neither do they start it the same way as each other.

Matthew begins with Jesus' genealogy –all those so and so was the father of so and so, a lineage, a long line of people whose lives led to this moment, a heritage and pedigree and journey. Here is where it begins, says Matthew.

Mark begins with grown up John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness- Prepare the way of the Lord! For Mark the whole story starts with this invitation, this proclamation, Jesus is here, Jesus is coming, God is bringing something new! Nothing at all about Jesus' early years.

John begins farther back - at the very beginning of time and space itself. The vast cosmos and the spoken word that brings life into being. In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God and the word was God. The Logos. The Christ.

Luke begins with Zechariah. And here is where it all begins. There once was this old priest...

The strange stirrings, the opening of heaven and earth, one of the moments the Holy One puts in motion the unfolding story to come and be God with us, was when this priest of the hill country went to do his duty in the most holy sanctuary, and an angel intruded.

And when this holy messenger Gabriel comes to Zechariah in the temple to give him shocking and impossible news, Zechariah doesn't get an explanation, or even a pause. Instead, he gets a grumpy angel retort, "Excuse me! I am Gabriel! I stand at the foot of the throne of God and you question me? You're going to be unable to speak now, until the time of his birth."

This story leaves so much to wonder. It just tells a story: it all began this way...

There are two things that struck things about the story and song of Zechariah.

The first is Zechariah's long silence.

Why the silence? Maybe silence was really what Zechariah needed throughout this experience, to come to some sort of trust.

Or what if, in fact, what the moment itself needed most was silence - a silent, observant witness to watch, and listen, and take in the enormity of this reality. A birth of the one who would prepare the way. A prophet. A child. A speaker of truth to turn people around, to be their deepest authentic selves.

Five months into his silence, five months of waking up each morning unable to talk and remembering immediately that something spectacular is afoot, five months along in his quiet seclusion of prenatal privacy, alongside his pregnant, secluded wife, out of the blue Elizabeth's young relative Mary blows into their lives.

And her arrival brings Elizabeth out of hiding, and brings Mary the solidarity and strength she needs to embrace this reality unfolding in her own body and through her own upended story.

And Zechariah the Silent opens his home to these astonishing things, and watches these women help each other into this reality with love and grace.

Just watching and listening and holding it all with honor and awe. This is how God being with us begins, Luke says. It begins with love from the Holy One - a love that changes the world and changes us.

After nine months Elizabeth gives birth to John, and Zechariah is still standing by, witnessing the wonder, when the attention shifts to him, "What do you say, Zechariah?"

And when he answers the same words Elizabeth had just spoken to them, "His name is John," his gestation is complete and his silence breaks open. And all that has simmered inside him

these nine months – seasoned with the faithfulness of God in his own long life and the history of God’s relationship with his people from the very beginning – gets stirred up by the Holy Spirit, and spills out of him.

And with utter joy and complete confidence he opens his mouth and sings his song,
*“Blessed are you, the Most High God of Israel—
for you have visited and redeemed your people.
You have raised up a mighty savior for us
of the house of David,
as you promised through the mouths of your holy ones,
the prophets of ancient times:*

It is a song. It is similar to songs and poems of Hebrew Prophets. Powerful song. That is the second thing that struck me. My friend Mark Davis helped me see that Zechariah’s song is really a protest song. (2) Think about Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and more.

Protest songs have 3 things in common.

1. Imbedded in a tradition
2. Honest about injustice – look at life from underside, those who are suffering
3. Offers meaningful hope – to offer a vision of a changed person or country or world
No more suffering, people have enough,

Zechariah’s song fits these criteria.

1. Very self-consciously standing in a tradition
Echoes of OT – David (God’s servant) prophet, covenant with Hebrews, Isaiah
2. Honest about suffering and injustice
Hand of our enemies, delivered, live in the shadows of death
This is reality he sees – people suffering in life
3. Also gives hope
Zechariah prophesies and tells the truth
By the tender mercies of God, God will come
Tender -in Greek is “the gut” – that is the place of the strongest feelings
*Such is the tender mercy of our God...who will guide our feet
into the way of peace.”*
From God’s gut to our feet!

So Zechariah the Silent becomes Zechariah, Parent to the Prophet of the Most High.

What do we do when we hear this song? We join the song.

1. We stand in our tradition - our spiritual places, following the ways of Jesus
2. We name injustice – economic systems even if we benefit from it
and name the problem - the problems of war, gun violence, children suffering....
3. We name our hope – that injustice does not get the final word

Here is where the story begins along the Advent road as we travel to Christmas. Depending on where you come from, and what you carry, and who's doing the telling, the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, God with us, love alive and alongside, begins and is born all over the place. The story can be entered anywhere.

On our road to Bethlehem, we lift up Zechariah - with his silent witness, his holy task, his entering in to silence, his growing awareness of what God was doing, and his bold song, he reminds us to be people who see and experience suffering and yet find a song of transformation and hope. The Holy One is at work in acts of kindness, justice and peace. Let's lean into that story and learn that song by heart. Amen.

1) Rev. Kara Root, "Witness of Wonder," Dec. 20, 2015

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2015/12/witness-of-wonder.html>

2) Rev. Mark Davis, "Singing for Justice: Zechariah's Song," December 4, 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/live/WqcwXGSW3bE?si=d2LbHmZm0zQQMasj>