

“Sing the Story: The Song of Zechariah”
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Luke 1:5-20, 57-80
Third Sunday of Advent | December 15, 2024

*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 ...
to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

These words have been a long time comin’. They’ve been stirring in Zechariah’s soul for some forty weeks, swirling within him until they burst forth, like water into the spillway of a dam.

During Advent we have been making our way through chapter one of Luke’s Gospel, hearing first the account of Gabriel’s visit to the unwed teenager who’d been chosen to bear God’s Son. We followed Mary from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea—to the home of Zechariah—where we heard blessings spill from Elizabeth’s lips and a song spring from Mary’s soul. This, alone, would have been plenty of preamble—more than any other Gospel writer gives of the events leading up to the Messiah’s birth. But the angel’s visit to Mary wasn’t even the start of the story. Before Gabriel appeared to Mary, he appeared to Zechariah. And this song has been stirring within the elderly priest ever since. It’s been taking shape, as if the Spirit has been knitting the words together in the depths of Zechariah’s soul even as the child is being knit together in the womb of his wife. Yes, Zechariah has been carrying this song within him since the beginning of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Although, maybe, it’s been longer ...

After all, Zechariah has been waiting decades to welcome a child into his family. As Luke tells us, he and Elizabeth have no children and are both getting on in years. We don’t know their ages. But if Zechariah and Elizabeth are anything like Abraham and Sarah—and the story suggests they are—we can assume that this village priest is well into his seventies. After all, his ancestor Abraham was seventy-five when the Lord called him to follow, promising him that he would be the father of a great nation. I expect Zechariah—like his forbear in the faith—is accustomed to waiting. Forty weeks is nothing. At this point, he’s probably been waiting forty *years* to become a father. In fact, he’s probably past the point of waiting—past the point of hoping for the longing of his heart to be fulfilled.

And really—if we take a step back, if we listen closely to the words of this song—we realize that Zechariah’s forty weeks of waiting is really a stand-in for the *community’s* waiting. In Scripture, the number forty signals a season of testing—of waiting, of wandering, of wondering if God will prove faithful—whether it’s forty days in the desert or forty years in the wilderness. So, the forty weeks

that Zechariah waits between the angel Gabriel's appearance and his son John's arrival is somehow symbolic. This time holds so much more than Zechariah's longing, than Elizabeth's anticipation. It holds the hopes and fears of all the years as the people have languished under the yoke of their enemy, as they've mourned in lonely exile for the dawn of a new day.

Yes, Zechariah's song has been a long time comin'. A long time coming. And, when it finally bursts forth, the peals of praise are all the more striking because of what has preceded it. For some forty weeks Zechariah has been mute. We almost don't notice the missing voice, because praise has punctuated Luke's story—the ecstatic joy of Elizabeth, the awe-filled wonder of Mary. But from Zechariah we've heard nothing. Except the sound of silence.

As you'll recall—when Gabriel announced that Elizabeth would bear a son—the village priest made a critical error. He questioned God's messenger: "How will I know that this is so?" Gabriel did not take kindly to being quizzed. And so, he rendered Zechariah mute—unable to speak until the day these things occur.

We do not know why Gabriel is so hard on Zechariah. The angel's response seems a bit extreme. Not to mention inconsistent. Generations before, when divine messengers visited Abraham and Sarah to tell them she would bear a son in her old age, Sarah laughed. And six months after Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah—when the same messenger visited Mary—she asked a question, too. And neither woman was rendered mute.

We do not know why Gabriel takes away Zechariah's ability to speak. So, I'll just chalk it up to good storytelling. Because the drama certainly draws us in. It invites curiosity. Much more than the song could alone. In fact, to be honest, while I love hearing Zechariah sing, I'm much more intrigued by his silence.

I'm fascinated by the notion of a priest who cannot speak, by the idea of a community's mouthpiece rendered mute. In those days, priests were the only ones who could enter the Holy of Holies—the part of the temple where God was thought to dwell. So, priests acted as intermediaries. They would approach the Holy to lift the people's prayers to God, to give voice to the hopes and fears of all the years.

Now Zechariah was not the only priest. When Gabriel silenced Zechariah, he did not silence the community's voice. They had other advocates who could carry their concerns to God. But it is interesting to observe what happens when one of the community's intercessors can no longer speak, specifically because he dared to give voice to his uncertainty ... When a community's priest was rendered mute because he couldn't believe that God would finally prove faithful. We might wonder if his apparent doubt was representative of the community's doubt—if Zechariah was giving voice to

the people's disappointment and despair, to a weariness that had descended after years of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled.

But that's not what plays out. In fact, the opposite happens. When Zechariah falls silent, the community's voice rings out ...

We actually witness this in the story *before* Zechariah falls silent. When the angel first appears to the priest, Gabriel announces, "Do not be afraid ... for your prayer has been heard." It is a curious greeting because Zechariah hasn't said a thing. We can assume, of course, that he has prayed consistently. Perhaps, Zechariah has prayed without ceasing. And I expect many of his prayers concern a child. Still, when Gabriel shows up, Zechariah hasn't uttered a word. But others have. Luke makes a point of telling us that, when Zechariah enters the sanctuary, the whole assembly of the people is praying outside. The priest has not lifted a single petition to God. But the *community* has. And the community continues to raise its voice.

When Mary suddenly shows up at Zechariah's door six months later, the priest has spent countless hours in silence—no doubt watching in wonder as Elizabeth's belly grows and reflecting on this amazing turn of events. Luke does not mention his presence, but I expect Zechariah is home when Mary arrives. I like to imagine the priest sitting in the corner—listening to the prophecy and praise that pours first from Elizabeth and then, from Mary. I like to imagine him bearing silent witness to the faith and faithfulness of two women who know in the depths of their being that the world is about to turn. It's true, the community's mouthpiece has been rendered mute, but—in this moment—the prayers of the faithful still rise, through the voices of women who declare defiantly that God's promises are being fulfilled.

The time comes for Elizabeth to give birth, and—still unable to speak—Zechariah silently welcomes his son. Once again, the community fills the void: Neighbors and friends hear that the Lord has shown great mercy, and—Luke tells us—they rejoice with Elizabeth. As yet, her husband cannot lift his voice in thanksgiving. But, nevertheless, the voice of the community rings out.

During these forty weeks—while Zechariah has waited for his voice to return, for his son to be born, for his God to prove faithful—others have filled the silence with prayer and praise, with wisdom and wonder. And, in doing so, the entire community has testified to the new thing God is doing. They've born witness *on behalf of* the silent priest—and *to* the silent priest—that God is faithful, that God shows mercy, that God gives light to those who sit in darkness.

I imagine this is one of the reasons that the silent priest erupts into song. When the elderly couple presents their baby boy, Zechariah confirms that his son will be called John, in accordance with the angel's command. And, immediately, Zechariah's mouth is opened, and his tongue is freed, and he is

able to lift his voice in praise. So, Zechariah sings. He sings because his imposed silence is over. He sings because God has done what Gabriel said God would do, giving this aged couple a child who will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

But Zechariah also sings because his faith has been restored, his hope has been renewed. I *don't* think this transformation comes only from welcoming a long-awaited but recently promised son. I think Zechariah's faith has been buoyed by the prayers and praise of the entire community, but especially those of Mary—who sang of the ways that God is righting the world. These are promises Zechariah echoes in his own song, but ones he had not heard about during Gabriel's visit. So, the silent priest must have been listening when Mary prophesied that God is always, already turning the world toward justice and peace. Yes, Zechariah must have heard Mary testify to the new thing God is bringing about through the Messiah's birth. And, I think, this witness of a maiden's song, of a community's prayer and praise helped to restore the hope and faith of a man who'd grown weary of waiting.

Filling the void created when voices fall silent is the work of community, especially during seasons of waiting when the world sits in darkness watching for the dawn from on high to break upon us. Those who have the faith to sing in these times are called to bear witness for those who have grown weary of waiting, whose faith is fragile, whose hope is spent. We are called to offer our prayers and praise, to speak the story, to sing the song—even as our voices echo through the silence of night.

I remember a story of one community doing just that ... This is *not* a story of a church community, but of a Baltimore neighborhood. And, as such, their collective witness did not come in the form of prayer or praise. But, still, their actions helped others find renewed hope in the darkness.

A few years ago, during the height of the pandemic, a man named Matt decided to string a single strand of Christmas lights from his home to the house across the street.¹ Matt knew his neighbor was facing a dark time; she had shared that she was dealing with depression and anxiety and was also grieving the loss of a loved one. So, he strung Christmas lights connecting their homes to remind his neighbor that—despite the isolation of the pandemic—she was not alone.

Well, that small act of love sparked a neighborhood-wide movement. Before long, there were strands of Christmas lights stretched across the road, connecting houses up and down the block. It was completely unplanned; this neighborhood display just grew out of everyone's desire to bring light to their community. One neighbor even decided to include a message. She stayed up all night bending

¹ Sydney Page, "A man strung Christmas lights from his home to his neighbor's to support her. The whole community followed, *The Washington Post* (December 21, 2021).

dry-cleaning coat hangers and wrapping cords around them so that the string of lights she hung across the road would spell the words: Love lives here.

The display didn't stop with the neighbors on Dunkirk Road. In the days that followed, residents living on nearby streets began stretching lights between their houses and those on opposite sides of the road. Soon, the whole community was illuminated; eventually, this neighborhood became a beacon of light to a world that seemed shrouded in darkness. The collective display resonated so deeply that the neighbors decided to make it a tradition. The next year they had a party to hang their Christmas lights together. And they vowed to do so every year to come, pandemic or otherwise.

This was not a group that set out to proclaim the goodness of God, to testify to the ways God gives light to those who sit in darkness. They did not—as far as I know—lift their voices in prayer and praise. But, still, the message that grew out of one neighbor's desire to bring help and hope served to bring light to those in need of joy—perhaps those whose faith was fragile, those who were beyond the capacity to imagine a new day.

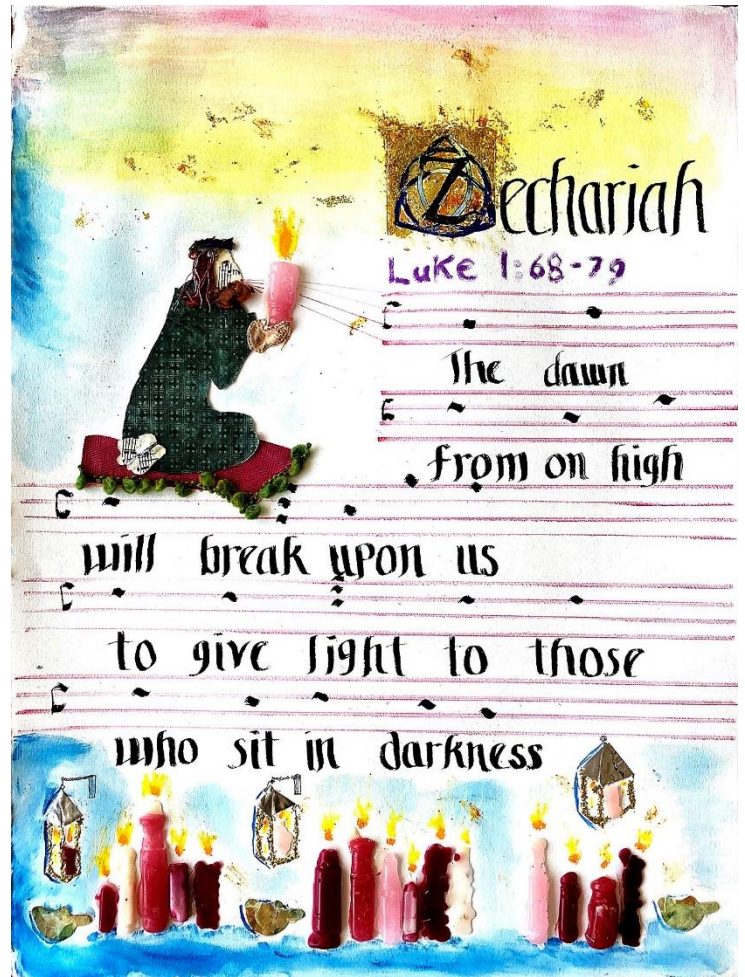
It is through community—and *for* community—that the church is called to respond. When the night is dark, when the wait is long, when faith is fragile and hope is spent, the church reaches out with hands that help and hearts that care. Against the silence, we lift our voices—in prayer and praise, in story and in song—bearing witness to the faithfulness of the God who is always, already doing a new thing. And in doing so, we seek to prepare a way for the Lord whose birth we celebrate. With Zechariah's son, we work to make a highway for our God to enter into this weary world and draw unto himself the hurting and the hopeless, the tired and the troubled, the disappointed and the doubting. And we look forward to that day when we will join in the songs of Elizabeth, of Mary, and of Zechariah, to celebrate that the dawn from on high does break upon us, that God is faithful still.

SING THE STORY ART INSTALLATION
Artwork and Artist's Note by Alice Price

Zechariah waited in silence until the birth of John, and then broke out in the longest song yet, closing his canticle with the image of light from above that similarly breaks out of the heavens.

The staves of the music come directly from his mouth as he lifts his face in song, and both his face and his feet are made of fabric with music notes. The hanging depicts a humble, pious, older man, with streaks of silver in his hair beneath his yarmulke, kneeling barefoot, on a prayer mat cut from remnants of Elizabeth's dress.

Zechariah sings about heavenly light, which—in the hanging—is the gold that erupts beyond the margins of the decorated initial Z, like meteor showers. That heavenly gold light is augmented by purple, white, and pink candles that illuminate the darkness, but also by lanterns and oil lamps, anticipating Jesus's reminder to keep our lamps trimmed and burning. Zechariah holds a large pink candle, the candle of joy, which we use in our Advent celebrations, but might also reference his own joy at the birth of his child, despite he and his wife being of advanced age.



Again, thanks to all the people who helped in the installation, photographing, and concept of this illustration.