

“From Silence to Praise”

Introduction: During our Wednesday evening Table Talks discussions, we have been listening and responding to the teaching of a pastor and writer named Randy Frazee. Frazee has been taking us through the grand, overarching story of the Bible with the observation that to understand the Bible well, you need bifocal lenses because two perspectives are involved. One, what he calls the Lower Story, is our story. It is the story of the many men, women, and children interacting with God in the here and now of our daily life. In these stories, we go to work, pay bills, enjoy vacations, get sick, deal with broken relationships, raise children, work through conflicts, etc. What Frazee calls the Upper Story is God’s story, the account of his great, overarching purpose to redeem and restore the world as he draws our many and challenging lower stories into his grand, beautiful one.

This is much like what Luke is doing as he begins his gospel account. Thirty verses go by without our hearing mention of the name Jesus. Instead, we are drawn in to the lower story of an elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. As we get to know them, we hear of their trials and tribulations as, though devout, they struggle in their daily life with disgrace and doubt. As we see how God begins to meet them in their pain, we also come to see that this couple is being used by God to accomplish and fulfill the great and precious promises of his upper story that is coming into fulfillment in Jesus.

Listen for both of those stories as we hear the text together. Also, as you listen, consider the silence that Gabriel imposed on Zechariah. Was it a punishment, or a gift, do you think? [READ]

I. Announcing John

A. Luke begins his gospel in the time of King Herod of Judea, and in the frustration and pain of an elderly couple. The husband, Zechariah, was a priest, which meant that he was one of about 18,000 priests whose normal, daily function was to serve as a teacher and leader in his local community. However, twice a year, for a week at a time, each division of priests (there were 24) would go to Jerusalem to serve at the Temple. One of the coveted roles during that week was to be the one who burned the incense that accompanied the morning and evening sacrifice. The smoke that rose up symbolized the lifting of the prayers of the people, to the Lord God Almighty.

B. Because there so many priests, the role of incense burner was chosen by lot. A priest had about one chance in a thousand to be chosen. Zechariah was one of those ones. But that, it turned out, wasn’t the half of it! While he was burning the incense, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and stood at the right side of the altar where Zechariah was working. The message of the angel was that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son and his name should be John. Moreover, a the angel went on, this John would be the one to prepare God’s people for the coming of the Messiah.

C. Well, you probably could’ve pushed Zechariah over with a feather! This was startling news, on many levels. For one, this couple had been barren for so long that they had stopped even hoping. Despite the fact that they had sought to follow God as closely as possible, they had remained childless, which, in their day, carried a stigma of disgrace. Certainly, they must’ve done something wrong, their cultural norm concluded, which had prevented them from conceiving. Additionally, they were both so far past childbearing years that Zechariah couldn’t imagine how bearing a son was possible. As disgrace had filled Elizabeth’s heart, doubt began to fill his.

D. I so appreciate his struggle. God had been silent for so long, both in this couple's life as well as in the life of their nation – a prophetic word from God had not been heard for 400 years – that the hope that God would intervene and put an end to the oppression coming from the hand of the Roman Empire being experienced by his people, and the disgrace being experienced by his wife, seemed dim at best. Zechariah heard the word of God from the angel, but, after so many years of heartache, deep disappointment and pain, just couldn't bring himself to believe it. Have you ever been in that place?

## II. The Gift of Silence

A. In response, Gabriel – the angel – pronounced a period of silence on Zechariah: He wouldn't be able to speak, the angel told him, until God's promises came to pass. Coming out of the temple, Zechariah tried to explain all that had just happened to him, almost like he was playing charades! And then he and Elizabeth went home, to wait, in the silence.

B. Now, it's easy to hear this silence as a punishment. But could it have been a gift as well? Could it have served as an invitation for Zechariah to listen for God in a way he had not done so before?

In Psalm 46, the ancient writer brings just such an invitation: "Be still and know that I am God."

The prophet Habakkuk chimes in with something similar: "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Hab. 2:20).

Make no mistake, spending time in periods of silence is not easy. We live in a loud and busy world where not much is quiet. In that kind of world, silence seems so, well, unproductive! When silence comes, we often look for an opportunity to fill it. Part of the reason for that, I have come to believe, is that noise helps us to stuff down what's really going on inside of us. But when we're quiet, when we're willing to mute ourselves, we make room for the Spirit of God who dwells within us to speak, to bring to the surface that which we might have wanted to avoid so that we and God can begin to work it through. The Spirit may do this by bringing a verse or passage of scripture to mind, he may bring to your attention a truth from a book or talk you have heard, he may remind you that God loves you, or he may whisper "peace" to your soul in a way that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

Times of silence also gives us time to reflect upon who God is and upon the wonders he has done. Zechariah would certainly have been aware of many barren women who God had enabled to conceive, he would've known of God's dramatic rescues of his people from slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon, he would've known of the expectation of a coming king from the line of David and a prophetic figure to prepare the way for this king. He would've known and would've taught all of that, and more. But he needed a period of silence, it seems, to connect it all to his life, to bring his lower story into God's upper one.

## III. The Response of Praise

A. This gift lasted, in turns out, for nine months. When their child was born, the cultural expectation was for this little boy to be named after his father. But Zechariah, indicating that he had indeed heard anew from God in the silence, declared that his son's name would be John, just as the

angel had instructed. Immediately upon this declaration, scratched out on a chalkboard, Zechariah's voice was returned to him, and he broke out in praise. His time of silence, as one writer put it, was indeed a pregnant pause, but it was not stillborn; it birthed a praise song. It's a song found in the worship liturgy of some Christian traditions called the Benedictus, meaning blessing.

In his song, Zechariah celebrates that God has not forgotten his promises to restore and renew his people, but has always been in the process of working them out. And even more, that Zechariah's son John, born in Zechariah's lower story, is indeed the prophet who God, in his upper story, has sent to prepare his people for his coming. Let's share it responsively (Luke 1:68-79, NLT):

<sup>68</sup> "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has visited and redeemed his people.  
<sup>69</sup> He has sent us a mighty Savior  
from the royal line of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup> just as he promised  
through his holy prophets long ago.  
<sup>71</sup> Now we will be saved from our enemies  
and from all who hate us.  
<sup>72</sup> He has been merciful to our ancestors  
by remembering his sacred covenant—  
<sup>73</sup> the covenant he swore with an oath  
to our ancestor Abraham.  
<sup>74</sup> We have been rescued from our enemies  
so we can serve God without fear,  
<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness  
for as long as we live.  
  
<sup>76</sup> "And you, my little son,  
will be called the prophet of the Most High,  
because you will prepare the way for the Lord.  
<sup>77</sup> You will tell his people how to find salvation  
through forgiveness of their sins.  
<sup>78</sup> Because of God's tender mercy,  
the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,  
<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
and to guide us to the path of peace."

Where might you be able to use a little silence in your life? Where might spending some time in quiet reflection on the hope that this season proclaims be helpful? Don't wait until Christmas Eve to sing Silent Night! How about setting aside, maybe not 9 months, but 9 minutes each day for the rest of this advent season? You could start those times by taking Zechariah's song and quietly reflecting on a phrase that catches your attention. What's going on in your Lower Story? Where do you need the light of God's Upper Story to meet you? Silence is a gift. Don't be afraid to open it!