

“Being Left with Nothing to Say”

Our focus at Christmas is the birth of Jesus, as it should be. But Luke begins his gospel, his biography of Jesus, with the story of Jesus’ *cousin*. John the Baptist was the forerunner for the Messiah, as indicated in the prophesy from Malachi read at the Advent candle; John came before Jesus preparing the way for the Messiah. His birth was also miraculous, not a virgin birth as with Mary and Jesus, but miraculous because Zechariah and Elizabeth could not have children.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth came from priestly families; serving God as clergy types was in their DNA. In another time, they may have been a clergy *couple*, but it was *that* time, and *only* Zechariah was allowed to enter the family business.

Every priest was to come to the Temple for a week of duty twice each year. Our story took place during that time. The priests who came to the Temple had plenty to do. They drew straws for duties. Perhaps once in a lifetime, each priest had the welcomed opportunity of going into the Sanctuary to burn incense while the people prayed. The incense would carry the prayers to God with a pleasing aroma. Zechariah drew the shortest straw thus privileging him for the honors to offer the incense.

Then the unthinkable happened: while burning the incense, Zechariah was frightened beyond measure when an angel suddenly appeared before him. Seeing the color leave Zechariah’s face, the angel said, “Don’t be afraid; your prayer has been heard.” Instead of referencing the corporate prayers of the people, the angel was speaking specifically of the petition by Zechariah to be a *dad*. The angel even told him what to name his son, John, which in Hebrew means “God is gracious and merciful.” This was not going to be an *ordinary* kid; *this* child was destined for greatness.

Gabriel offered a specific message with a specific purpose: the childless couple were going to produce a great son. But Zechariah doubted the *validity* of the announcement. He focused on the *how*, realizing his age, the age of his wife, and their childless predicament. His question, “How can I be sure of this?” was ill-timed, much like your new mother-in-law asking “How do you like my meatloaf?” or after opening a Christmas present asking, “How much did you pay for this?” or to the Chairman of Microsoft asking, “Mr. Gates, how can I know this check is good?”

The angel did not directly answer the question. Instead, the messenger simply stated, “I am Gabriel. I am God’s messenger with a specific message for you. Since you don’t believe me, I will take away your speech, and you won’t be able to speak until your son is born. Nanny-nanny-poo-poo.” Did you catch the irony of that? A preacher who can’t talk? Kinda like a chef who can’t taste.

Then Zechariah had to face the people. Like American church members at 12:04 on Sundays, some of those gathered were shaking their watches wondering what was taking him so long. Finally he appeared, with a “deer in the headlights” look on his face. He had been *caught*, and now he had to face the consequences.

Zechariah had to face the people as a speechless puppet playing a game of charades. For those who had *waited* for a blessing, the one who had received a *grand* blessing was unable to utter a *blessed* word.

Zechariah had waited a lifetime to offer the incense, and then an even bigger life-dream came. Perhaps he was overwhelmed at the thought of so much divine attention. But if that was the case, then why did he doubt? Was his cynicism over the unanswered prayers for the birth of a child so great that he was jaded by caution when the good news finally came? Did he simply *not* believe it could happen?

Advent is a time for waiting. Zechariah had to wait nine months to get his voice back. For at least nine months, he could not speak. I wonder how he communicated with his wife of the angelic

visit, or did he keep this news to himself? In silence, Zechariah must have wondered if the angel was telling the truth. Had he been hallucinating? What if his voice *never* returned? Who would want a priest who was *speechless*? But then over time, Elizabeth's waist-line began to expand; her body began to change. Elizabeth became living proof that the angel was telling the truth. For months, nothing Zechariah could say would have been more profound than the sight of his baby growing inside his wife.

When his son was born, the whole community rejoiced. Following the Jewish custom, the child was circumcised on the eighth day; that was the day the child was also named. Everyone thought he should bear the name of his proud papa. Elizabeth meekly indicated that his name would be John, because God had been gracious.

Neighbors and relatives said, "John? Why John? You have waited so long to have a child. Obviously God has blessed you with a wonderful baby boy, a gift to your family. There is no one else in the family who is named John. Make him a legacy of his father and call him Zechariah, Jr."

They then turned to Zechariah and began making signs to him to find out what *he* wanted to name the baby. Upon a post-it note, Zechariah wrote in bold letters, "His name is John."

That action of faith and obedience freed his tongue; no longer did he have to wait in silence. The prophesy was complete. The angel was right. Elizabeth and Zechariah, despite their ages and child-bearing difficulty, had produced a baby boy. Since what the angel had proclaimed was true, now Zechariah had to do what the angel requested. With the renewed ability to speak, Zechariah offered praise and thanksgiving to God.

How do *we* respond to the good news when it comes *our* way? When *our* life-dreams become reality? When *our* prayers are answered? When unexpected good fortune crosses *our* path? Have we lived in the land called "not good enough" for so long that we fear the hidden treasure that finds us?

In hindsight, I wonder if Zechariah kicked himself for asking without thinking "How will I know that this is so?" His abrupt response was more than the *doubting* of an angel; he was questioning God's power.

During Advent, we anticipate, we wait, to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child. We prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus. We read of the miraculous; we become awed by the incarnation, the fact that God came to earth in the form of a baby. And maybe in the back of our minds, we are asking the question, "How will we *know* that this is so?"

How many times are we going through the motions in our service to God, and we get surprised? How often have we heard the good news of God's promises that we forget that they are true? Have the words "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so," lost its impact? Has the option of having a peace that surpasses human comprehension been taken for granted and replaced with the question "How will I *know* that this is so?" Has the *faithfulness* of being a Christian been replaced with the *apprehension* contained in the question, "How will I know that this is so?"

Faith is not based on knowing. Evidentiary hearings and concrete proof are not part of the faith equation. The writer of Hebrews defined faith this way, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen." If we have to see it to believe it, then faith comes slowly. If we need proof, then we shortchange our relationship with God. If we have to know with *certainty* that this is so, then we, like Zechariah are left with nothing to say.

"How will we know that this is so?" is a question that is being asked everyday. How often do we give lip-service to our family members and friends about how important they are to us, and they ask, "How will we know that this is so?" How many times does a lonely world hear that Jesus will never leave them, and they ask, "How will we know that this is so?" How many times do people with physical needs hear the phrase "God loves you," and they ask "How will we know that this is so?"

Actions speak louder than words. Zechariah doubted the messenger of God and lost his ability

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to talk. Gabriel was a direct extension of God providing a unique message to a priest, of all people. Yet the clergyman wondered how.

During Advent, remember that everyday people are looking at us to answer the questions about God by asking “How will we know that this is so?” In answering this question, there is no time for *waiting*. Angels are God’s Messengers sent for a specific purpose with a specific message. Today’s specific message is this: When the world asks, “How will we know that this is so?” my prayer is that you and I will have *something* to say.