

The Song of Zechariah we read today comes to us situated in the middle of the times leading up to the birth of Christ. Luke situates the narrative leading up to Christ's birth in the midst of some very powerful people. Luke tells us that Elizabeth comes from a priestly line. She is married to Zechariah, a temple priest himself. In addition, we find ourselves today in the time of Emperor Tiberias, Governor Pilate, and King Herod of Judea. The story of Zechariah begins with this list of priests and rulers, which not only situates us historically but politically.

The reign of Christ is about to break into the reign of Rome and break its reign of control over God's temple. The inauguration of the reign of Christ is about to be announced by people whose voices have been silent for a long time, women whose voices didn't matter because of their gender, a man whose voice was silent because he followed God's call to engage in spiritual retreat, and a man whose voice was silenced because he needed to pay attention to what God was doing and learn to amplify other voices before he spoke another word. And each one, as their voice breaks forth, sings or prophesies of the reign of Christ bringing God's deliverance, of God reigning over the powers that sought to control whose voice went heard and unheard. And these songs and prophesies from voices long silenced declare what they know to be real and true and impending: The Reign of Christ is near.

Until Herod's reign, the High Priest came to his position from heredity or brother-to-

brother. But Herod and later Roman governments changed and undermined the office by appointing the High Priest themselves rather than allowing the descendants of the priestly order to be appointed to the role. The powerful Roman state had infiltrated religious leadership to the point where priests like Zechariah, those of the ordinary priestly status, had less power and influence than those chief priests working under the High Priest, appointed by the Roman government.

Despite the now-reduced moral and spiritual authority of the chief priests in collusion with the Roman government, according to Luke, the regular functions of ordinary priests like Zechariah were carried out correctly, in faithfulness.

We find descriptors of Zechariah and Elizabeth in the first chapter of Luke such as "righteous before God". Being described as righteous alone would imply that they did a good job of ticking the boxes next to each "must-do" or "must-not-do" in God's law. But with the additional phrase "before God," Zechariah and Elizabeth are placed in the company of others described in this way: Abraham and Sarah, Hannah and Elkanah, Simeon, Joseph of Arimathea, and Ananias. The simple fact that Zechariah not only performed his regular temple duties but also prayed for a child in a personal way shows that piety and faithfulness still worked together for the good, even in this time of unrighteous infiltration into religion by the state. With the phrase "before God," Zechariah and Elizabeth are lifted up as ones who walk closely with God, who live close to the

heart of God, who deeply feel God's presence and practice God's law less out of obligation and more out of a joyful willingness to live close to God's way. They have more than ritual attachment; they have a living faith.

But God calls Zechariah to something more. Yes, Zechariah is righteous before God, and yes, he worships God with sincerity and in ways unadulterated by the Roman infiltration into the priesthood. But there's a bigger step God wants him to take, an out-of-the box, unusual, perhaps scarier step of faithfulness that he hasn't considered before. And to take that step in the same faithfulness he has been practicing as a priest, God needs him to fall silent and pay attention.

The time has now come for Zechariah to lead his people in the way of the Lord in a manner he hasn't led before. The control of Rome over the High Priest and chief priests meant that God's people could practice their faith in the everyday, ritualistic, routine ways, but that the call for God's reign to take hold in more public ways was dangerous. So they stuck to the routine. Zechariah is chosen because he lives out his faith righteously in the eyes of God, but to stay safe from Roman influence, he must provide an easy religion, one that doesn't stir the pot too much, that keeps people safe, albeit stuck in their own voicelessness in the face of the powerful empire.

So God interrupts Zechariah during the temple rituals with a messenger. Zechariah and Elizabeth are older in age, so it comes

as a surprise to Zechariah when an angel appears to him in the middle of his regular duties during worship to let him know that Elizabeth will get pregnant and bear a son. And their child will be who we know as John the Baptist, who later announces the soon-coming Messiah. Not only does Gabriel, the messenger from God, tell him this, he also tells Zechariah that because he didn't believe Gabriel, he will be unable to speak until Elizabeth gives birth. So after this vision, when he walks back out to address the congregation, Zechariah cannot speak the customary ritual blessing over the people.

And so, at God's bidding, Zechariah, the man from the priestly order, whose job is to speak prayers and blessings and read scriptures before the people in the temple, becomes a voice long silenced. Zechariah, who, despite saying nearly the same words Mary later uttered when Gabriel visited her, was found to be in disbelief of the birth God was bestowing upon his household.

God needs Zechariah, the priest, the one who speaks the prayers and blessings over the people, to fall silent. For Zechariah, a priest, having an infirmity of silence means that he cannot serve in his regular duties in the temple, according to Levitical law. God needs Zechariah to stop being a teacher for a while and learn to listen to voices silenced longer than his would be. God needs Zechariah to stop praying out loud, stop saying the ritual words, and pay attention to what is going on around him. The reign of Christ is near, and God needs him to be silent and watch carefully for it.

God needs him to learn how to amplify voices long silenced.

And so, during Zechariah's silence, we arrive in a scene of Mary visiting Elizabeth for three months, which lasts through Mary's first trimester of pregnancy, and Elizabeth's last trimester. During that visit we get no mention of either Zechariah or Joseph. Zechariah is silent from the time just before Elizabeth conceived, until the circumcision of John, at least nine months. And Joseph is absent. He hasn't yet heard about Mary's pregnancy. Zechariah's silence and Joseph's absence allows Mary and Elizabeth's voices to be amplified as they proclaim the arrival of John and Jesus. The voices of those two women, long silenced, now ring out and proclaim what God is about to do.

Maybe Zechariah hears the women in his house. Maybe he has to listen, in silence to the prophetic words they speak and sing. Maybe, in his silence and forced cessation of his somewhat powerful duties as a God-chosen priest, he has to pay attention to the power and awe and chosenness of not only his beloved wife but also to the power and awe and chosenness of an unwed, pregnant teenager from a backwater town called Nazareth. And maybe he needs to go silent so he can pay attention to the power and awe and chosenness of his own son as well.

The scriptures tell us that God has placed a special calling on Elizabeth and Zechariah's child, even before his birth. According to most scholars, God calls John to take on what the Gospel of Luke essentially describes as the lifestyle a

Nazarite. Some people took upon this special practice of Judaism to separate themselves from society and dedicate themselves to the Lord for a period of time by growing long hair, giving up all grape products, including wine and strong drink, and other practices. To end their time as a Nazarite, those undergoing this temporary practice would make a sacrifice. We don't know if John made such a sacrifice or not, but we do know that he gave up wine and strong drink, grew a long beard and long hair, and lived in the desert until he appeared publicly before Israel. After wandering in the desert, alone, with no way to use his voice with people, for who knows how long, John emerges as the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.

Voices long silenced break forth at the coming of the new Ruler. Zechariah has a front-row seat to witness these voices breaking forth, to watch the reign of Christ breaking in, and to learn, without interrupting, without overshadowing the voices long silenced that are now breaking forth in praise and prophecy. And he must have learned, because when it comes time to name his child, he allows Elizabeth's voice to name John according to what God intends.

When John is born, Elizabeth's neighbors rejoice that God has shown mercy on her and Zechariah in their old age by blessing them with a child. But those in the temple for John's circumcision ceremony gasp in disbelief that Zechariah would name his son something other than a family name. What was Elizabeth thinking? She must be

out of her mind. Of course, this child would be called into the priestly line of his father, named after his father, taking on the same duties and authority of his father. So the temple priests, in shock, and in disbelief of his wife, turn to Zechariah for confirmation. And he writes on a tablet that his son will be named John.

It is when Zechariah amplifies Elizabeth's voice, emphasizes the truth in the message she received and communicates from God, that his mouth is opened and his tongue is freed. And Luke tells us that in that moment, John is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks the prophecy we read today. What his mouth is opened and his tongue is freed to say is a prophetic song of praise for what God is about to do.

Unlike Mary's song about Jesus, at first read, Zechariah's prophecy doesn't seem to talk about God scattering the proud, bringing the powerful down from their thrones, and sending the rich away empty. Like Mary, Zechariah tells us that we are about to receive the Messiah. Like Mary, he tells us that we stand on the threshold of a fulfilled promise from God. We stand on the precipice of hope for those sitting in darkness, mercy, redemption, freedom from fear, rescue from our enemies, and guidance to walk in the paths of peace. And he tells us that his own child will prepare the way, prodding people to turn from sin and turn toward that future of mercy and freedom God offers through Mary's child. Sounds simple enough, right?

But taking a closer look at our context, at our historical situation here, we find that

Zechariah's song isn't quite as benign as we thought. Zechariah is talking to us from the point of view of an ordinary priest. This puts him in a place of power relative to those ordinary worshipers around him, but in a place of subordination to the chief priests, especially those who upheld the statutes of the High Priest appointed by the Roman state, who had sullied his people's religious practices via state infiltration. Although on some occasions, Zechariah is surrounded by some of the most powerful people in his society, he distinguishes himself from them in his genuine faithfulness, which does not reflect the power of the state but the power of the God of Israel.

So when Zechariah's voice long silenced activates again, when his mouth is opened and his tongue is freed to utter his prophecy, he speaks of God redeeming God's people from the hands of the Romans. He speaks of Jesus, the promised Messiah, who will come to save them from the Roman enemies, so that the ordinary priests and ordinary people can worship and serve God freely, publicly, in true righteousness, without fear of the Romans forcing them into quiet ritual. In his long silence, he must have listened to the song of Mary, to the voice of Elizabeth praising God for the children she and Mary carried, to the voices long silenced in his own life. And so the tune of his song changed. He wasn't merely going through the righteous rituals and saying his private prayers anymore. No, Zechariah was proclaiming a transformation of faith that would permeate the walls of the temple and the walls of the homes where people prayed,

weaving its way through the whole of society.

Like Mary, Elizabeth, and John, Zechariah's voice proclaims the arrival of Jesus, who will reign over and against all power that would seek to undermine God's reign of mercy, freedom, and peace. And people throughout Judea pay attention to Zechariah, knowing that when he lost his voice he had seen a vision, knowing that when he confirmed the name of his child that God had restored his voice, knowing that the child Elizabeth would bear would be special.

And that is what happens when voices long silenced finally break forth into prophecy and song. People start to wonder what God is about to do. People start to get ready for something new and unusual and uncomfortable and very real to happen. They start to look up from their rituals and everyday prayers. People start to get busy with the Lord's work, not just in the temple, not just in their own household, but in the world, because they sense that the Lord is at work *everywhere* in a very real, visible, powerful way.

We don't really see much of God working in a real, powerful, visible way in 2022, do we? The appearances of messengers from God, the signs that God is breaking into our everyday lives, the proclamation that God's reign is near – that was all in the past; it doesn't happen now. Probably all of us in here are righteous, and maybe even righteous before God like Zechariah and Elizabeth, meaning that we do sense a real presence of God in our lives, in worship

with the congregation, and maybe a little bit in the wider world around us. We do pray sincerely. We do find spiritual meaning and life in the rituals. But the kinds of signs from the Gospel of Luke, those signs of God's real, live presence, of God's reign actually breaking into people's lives and into the world? People whose voices had been dismissed, silenced, pushed aside called by God to prophesy and sing, to carry God's messengers – and even Jesus Christ – into the world? People whose voices were silenced so they could listen for those voices long silenced and learn to amplify the voices of others? That has already happened. That's all over, said, and done. All we need to do now is live as God intended for us to live, to show up to church and sing the songs and pray the prayers and light the candles and read the scriptures – those ordinary priestly things that Zechariah did, righteous before God.

Right?

Or is God really still alive and active and moving and breathing among us? Does God really call us to more than the rituals of worship and song and prayer? Is the reign of Jesus Christ about to break into our lives and into our world, even now, even today? Is it already breaking in?

Yes, yes, indeed, friends. The reign of Jesus Christ is breaking into our lives already. As John the Baptist cried out, the kingdom of heaven is indeed near.

In case you haven't heard them, voices long silenced are breaking out in speech. Something is silencing our rituals and

disrupting our usual way of being the church—we can no longer ignore what is going on outside this building. When long silenced voices start to speak, the reign of God is near. When there are voices crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the Way of the Lord,” when a voice from the poor part of town travels to a wealthy neighborhood and starts singing a song about casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly, the reign of God is near. And when the powerful – even the righteous powerful – are silenced, forced to pay attention to what is happening around them, the reign of God is near.

And yes, this is happening right now. We can no longer pretend that what is happening outside the walls of this sanctuary does not need to be discussed, considered, discerned, and noticed within these walls.

And so as we celebrate in our worship today the reign of Christ, as we prepare for the Advent journey, we wonder together:

Whose voices in your life have been long silenced? For whom in your life, in your community do you need to silence your own voice in order to hear God’s calling for you?

Whose voices in the life of the church have been long silenced? Who is patiently waiting for the right time to share a new idea, an insight of where God is leading the church? Who is searching for someone to listen to and amplify their faithful voice?

Whose voices in our society and in our world have been long silenced? Who is displaying their emotions in what many of us would deem “unhearable” ways? Those are likely the ones whose voices are still not being heard. Whose voices, long silenced, then, are we called to hear and amplify in new ways? And who, after long silence, has gained voice and is now calling for the reign of Christ – the way of freedom from fear, the way of peace, the way of forgiveness, the way of mercy – to break into our very lives, even today?

And if you have been a voice long silenced, who is God calling you to speak to? To whom is God calling you to sing a song or utter a prophecy that indeed the reign of Christ is near or even right here? To whom is God calling you to give voice to where you have witnessed the reign of Christ at work and how you sense God calling a larger community moving into that work? And how might God be calling you to sing and prophesy, over and above any earthly powers that try to create God in their own image of power?

Take silence. Listen. Notice. And then break out in song. Proclaim what you learn from your time of voice long silenced, whenever that time of silence was or is to be: The reign of Christ is near. Amen.

Louis W. Ndekha<sup>1</sup>, *Zechariah the model priest: Luke and the characterisation of ordinary priests in Luke-Acts*, HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422.